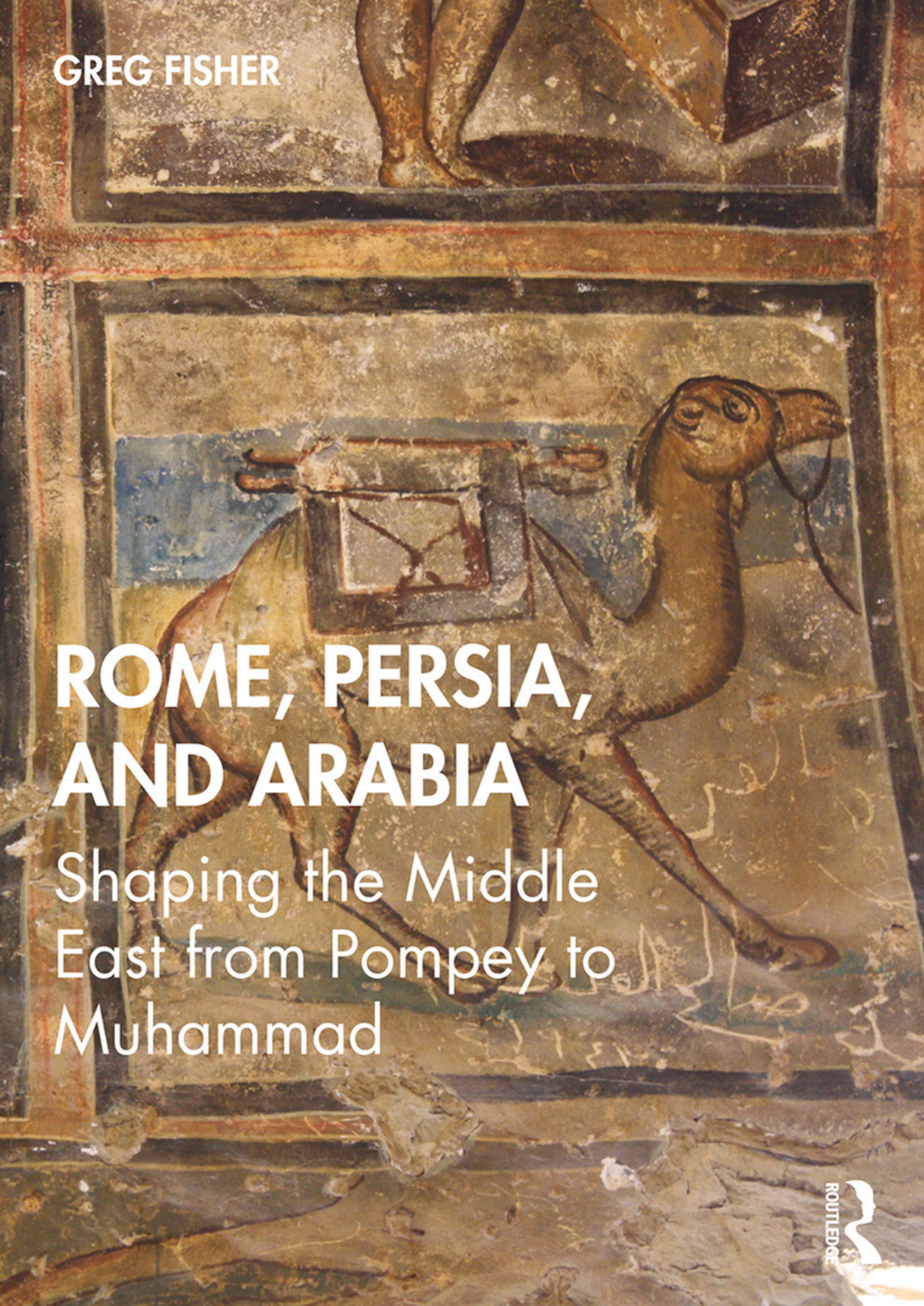




GREG FISHER

ROME, PERSIA, AND ARABIA

Shaping the Middle
East from Pompey to
Muhammad

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Rome, Persia, and Arabia

“This is the definitive political history of the Arabs before Islam. Fisher deftly describes how the emergent Arab tribes navigated the complex political landscape between the Roman, Parthian, and Persian Empires. Even though I’ve studied this topic for years, I learned something new on almost every single page. Anyone interested in Middle Eastern history should read this book.”

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Richly illustrated and covering a vast area from the fertile lands of South Arabia to the bleak deserts of Iraq and Syria, this book provides a detailed and captivating narrative of the way that the empires of antiquity affected the politics, culture, and religion of the Arabs. It examines Rome’s first tentative contacts in the Syrian steppe and the controversial mission of Aelius Gallus to Yemen, and takes in the city states, kingdoms, and tribes caught up in the struggle for supremacy between Rome and Persia, including the city state of Hatra, one of the many archaeological sites in the Middle East that have suffered deliberate vandalism at the hands of the ‘Islamic State’. The development of an Arab Christianity spanning the Middle East, the emergence of Arab fiefdoms at the edges of imperial power, and the crucial appearance of strong Arab leadership in the century before Islam provide a clear picture of the importance of pre-Islamic Arabia and the Arabs to understanding world and regional history.

Rome, Persia, and Arabia includes discussions of heritage destruction in the Middle East, the emergence of Islam, and modern research into the anthropology of ancient tribal societies and their relationship with the states around them. This comprehensive and wide-ranging book delivers an authoritative chronicle of a crucial but little known era in world history, and is for any reader with an interest in the ancient Middle East, Arabia, and the Roman and Persian empires.

Greg Fisher is a graduate of the University of Oxford, UK, and the author and editor of numerous works on the ancient world including *Between Empires* (2011), *Arabs and Empires before Islam* (2015), and *Hannibal and Scipio* (2016).



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Rome, Persia, and Arabia

Shaping the Middle East from Pompey
to Muhammad

Greg Fisher

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In memory of Fergus Millar, 1935–2019



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Greg Fisher
Montreal, Canada

Note to the Reader

I have strived throughout to keep names from Arabic, Syriac, Greek and Latin sources in the most familiar English rendering possible, and I have not therefore included transliteration marks used to render long vowels or different consonants and stops.

1 Writing the History of (the) Pre-Islamic Arabs

Introduction

For a long time the study of the place that the Greeks and Romans called ‘Arabia’—a vast area stretching from the Peninsula up into the southern parts of modern Jordan, Syria, and Iraq—remained tucked away in obscurity at the edges of the classical world. Even though figures as famous as Alexander the Great and the Roman emperor Augustus were fascinated by Arabia and assembled ambitious expeditions to explore it, the region was of only minor interest to a discipline whose centres of gravity were located far away in the Mediterranean. For scholars of later periods the pre-Islamic age was sometimes overlooked, because the emergence of Islam, the conquests of the Middle East and North Africa, and the building of the caliphates seemed the most suitable topics on which to focus questions about Arab politics, religion, identity, and literary culture. In consequence, pre-Islamic Arabia remained in a disciplinary no-man’s land between the study of the classical world and that of the Islamic period—of some interest to both, but not really belonging to either. The results of this academic ambiguity are easy to see in any library catalogue. While Irfan Shahîd began his multi-volume project with *Rome and the Arabs* in 1984, providing an in-depth examination of the subject, it was not until 2001 that a concise single-volume historical work on pre-Islamic Arabia appeared in English.¹ Before 2007 no new single-volume work on Arab Christianity had been published since 1979, and to this day no up-to-date book exists in English on the topic.²

In the last two decades, however, the history of pre-Islamic Arabia has steadily emerged from obscurity, both in academia and, more generally, in the mainstream media. The attacks of 9/11, the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the Arab Spring and its attendant crises from Tunisia to Syria, the Saudi-led war in Yemen, the actions of the so-called ‘Islamic State’ (ISIS), and the ongoing assault on cultural heritage across the Arab world have all focused intense scrutiny on the Middle East.³ There is now a veritable groundswell of work on the region covering every conceivable angle, including new concise histories of Iraq⁴ and Syria,⁵ as well as detailed works on the histories of Baghdad⁶ and Damascus.⁷ There is a proliferation of websites, mailing lists, newspaper articles, and books covering historical sites damaged in the turmoil that has consumed the region—places such as Palmyra⁸ and Aleppo,⁹ or the hundreds of other lesser-known locations of archaeological, historical, and cultural interest, many of which date from pre-Islamic antiquity.¹⁰ The efforts by groups such as ISIS to eradicate religious and cultural difference, through attacks on specific archaeological sites such as Palmyra and Hatra as well as savage attacks on religious communities, have called attention to the diversity of the ancient Middle East in both the pre-Islamic and Islamic periods.¹¹

2 Writing the History of (the) Pre-Islamic Arabs

The tragic course of events subsuming much of the Arab world has, in its own way, driven an appetite for further information about the Middle East and its complex history. Much of this information has come from the academy, both in terms of articles and specialised studies, as well as cultural preservation initiatives such as *Shirin International* or the American Schools of Oriental Research's *Cultural Heritage Initiatives*.¹² Within the academy, however, a far older and quite separate course of events had long laid the necessary groundwork for a more subtle and inclusive understanding of the pre-Islamic Middle East.

Towards the end of the twentieth century there was an important shift in the way that scholars approached the study of the ancient world. Emerging as the discipline of 'Late Antiquity' (with the term, either capitalised or not, also used informally to denote, in general, the post-classical period) it brought to the fore a methodology that radically altered conventional ways of viewing the ancient Mediterranean. The traditional geographic and temporal boundaries that delineated the history of classical Greece and Rome were upended, and broader vistas were opened up for enquiry; ranging from Ireland to China, and examining an elastic timeframe anywhere from c. AD 200 to 800 or later, the study of late antiquity pulled the periphery—in the east, places like Arabia, Persia (Iran), Central Asia, Armenia, and the Caucasus—into the classical academic centre, creating a more expansive research area where Arabia and places like it became relevant to scholars of the Graeco-Roman world.¹³ The different lands of the Middle East came under renewed scrutiny and pre-Islamic Arabia, as something of an untapped research area, attracted the attention of a whole new range of scholars. The work of specialists of South Arabian inscriptions became of much broader interest to Roman historians, while experts in Old Arabic or anthropologists of tribal¹⁴ societies found themselves in more intense dialogue with experts on Greek epigraphy. This multifaceted effort, very much a product and feature of the late antique discipline, has delivered a vastly improved understanding of so many research areas that were previously not necessarily included in the classical discipline, including pre-Islamic Arabia. Despite the impediments to research in the Middle East, work continues apace to this day. A Saudi project is currently translating the numerous Graeco-Roman witnesses to pre-Islamic Arabian history into Arabic, while in 2015 the first-ever critical anthology of sources on pre-Islamic Arabia and the Arabs, *Arabs and Empires before Islam*, was published.¹⁵ Proof of the vitality of the field is provided by the fact that while *Arabs and Empires* was in press, a Franco-Saudi team working in Saudi Arabia published a clutch of new inscriptions that overturned one of the major parts of the book!¹⁶ Even in war-torn Yemen, ancient inscriptions are still being discovered.¹⁷ One of the most interesting of all the late antique research areas today is the study of early Islam ('Paleo-Islam') and its relationship to the sixth-century Middle East. In a reflection of the multidisciplinary basis of late antique studies, current projects on this topic foster a dialogue between scholars of early Islam and those studying the pre-Islamic period.¹⁸

Contemporary observers of the crises in the Middle East draw attention to the Sykes–Picot Agreement and the decisions made at the end of the First World War that laid the foundation for the dismemberment of the Ottoman empire. These events did much to create the 'old order' in the Middle East which has now been so violently dismantled by the calamities in Syria and Iraq.¹⁹ As Christopher Phillips has recently shown, the behaviour of external state actors continues to shape and drive conflict in the region and impact the lives of its citizens.²⁰ Sykes–Picot is now over a century old, but, from a broader perspective, it was just one of many attempts throughout history by outsiders to influence the political and demographic map of the Middle East. In antiquity, older efforts by more distant 'Great Powers' also had a profound impact on the political, religious, and cultural boundaries of the region, and for

those caught in the middle, the situation resembled an ancient form of ‘the Great Game’—the nineteenth-century struggle between the British empire and Tsarist Russia for influence in Central Asia.

Focusing on the Arab peoples of the ancient world, this book looks back to a period dating from the arrival of the Roman general Pompey in Syria (63 BC) to the birth of the Prophet Muhammad and the Muslim conquest of much of the Middle East (c. AD 570–650). The history of the Arabs during this time, viewed through the prism of their relationship with their neighbours, is of deep interest for understanding a more distant shaping of a region whose modern volatility echoes the violence and turmoil of its ancient past. The lengthy period between Pompey and Muhammad witnessed a complex struggle between Rome, Persia, and the kingdom of Himyar in Yemen for the political and religious loyalties of the peoples of the Middle East, including those recognised as ‘Arabs’, who lived in the numerous ‘Arabias’ known to Graeco-Roman writers. Arabs found themselves swept up in the political and religious cross-currents of the time, and became unavoidably drawn into imperial diplomatic initiatives, military campaigns, and interregional strife. Arab troops supported Roman, Himyarite, and Persian armies in their continual conflicts, and complex proxy wars were waged for the allegiance of groups of Arabs throughout the deserts of the Arabian Peninsula. Persian kings campaigned along the eastern coast of Arabia, and eventually conquered Himyar, while Roman armies sought to extend imperial influence throughout the Red Sea. Both Jews and Christians were part of Arabia’s religious culture, and Roman ambassadors sought to convert the Himyarite kings to Christianity. Religious violence between Jews and Christians at Najran in the 520s produced a celebrated literary outpouring that, some argue, left an imprint in the Quran. Christian Arabs in what is now Syria and Jordan became benefactors of churches, erected Arabic inscriptions on Christian monuments, and assumed positions of great authority in Roman political life. All of this happened against the backdrop of the imperial supremacy of Rome and Persia—the Great Powers of the time—and the less imposing, but no less consequential, influence of the kingdom of Himyar.

Before turning to the arrival of Rome in the Middle East, it is necessary to address several important issues: the meaning and use of the terms ‘Arabs’ and ‘Arabia’, as well as ‘tribe’ and ‘state’; questions about sources; and the relevance of imperial power to the study of pre-Islamic Arab history. Together, these elements create a methodological framework to tell the story of Arabs in the pre-Islamic period.

Arabs and Arabias

Ancient writers used the terms ‘Arab’ and ‘Arabia’ rather loosely; the title of this chapter reflects this fact, since, as we shall see in Chapter 2, there was a myriad of Arab peoples and many places called Arabia.²¹ These ambiguities have proven frustrating for some modern scholars, who have expended considerable energy trying to narrow down the various characteristics that could be said to define what Arabs ‘were like’ in pre-Islamic antiquity.²² Yet in the modern world the criteria used to describe different communities can also tend towards imprecision, and so it should not be too much of a surprise that this was often true for antiquity. Even the famous comments by Herodotus about the features binding the peoples of Greece together—‘blood and speech, and the shrines of gods and the sacrifices that we have in common, and the likeness of our way of life’—are somewhat vague.²³ Furthermore, the criteria used to classify groups of people often say more about the people and the cultures that use them, rather than anything of any particular use about the people they are describing.²⁴

4 Writing the History of (the) Pre-Islamic Arabs

With this in mind, it is no surprise that ancient descriptions of Arabs vary tremendously. Almost all of our information about Arabs comes not from Arabs themselves, but from observers writing within the Graeco-Roman world such as geographers, explorers, and military officers. These writers were ‘outsiders’ to the world that they were describing and to them Arabs were often interpreted through an ethnographic lens that made them into the ‘other’.²⁵ They did not fit easily into established perceptions of the Graeco-Roman world, and thus were understood to belong firmly outside Mediterranean civilisation. In general terms Graeco-Roman writers called such people ‘barbarians’, a pejorative and judgmental term that was also used of the Germanic peoples in the Roman west, such as the Goths, Franks, Huns, or Vandals. In ancient literature, barbarians were thought to be uncouth, uncivilised, dangerous, and unreliable, and were described in a variety of stereotypical ways.²⁶ The highly educated and urbane fourth-century AD Roman officer Ammianus Marcellinus, for example, said that the Huns were ‘so monstrously ugly and misshapen, that one might take them for two-legged beasts or for the stumps, rough-hewn into images, that are used in putting sides to bridges’.²⁷ Ammianus described Arabs in equally unflattering terms, saying that ‘no man ever grasps a plough-handle or cultivates a tree [and] none seeks a living by tilling the soil’, while many were ‘wholly unacquainted with grain and wine’.²⁸ This assessment echoed generalised views of barbarians, and especially nomads, whom Aristotle viewed with disdain in his influential work, the *Politics*. Arabs, and groups of Arabs (‘tribes’, on which see below), were regularly categorised as nomads in ancient texts, and this helped to cement their literary place as barbarous wanderers at the very edges of the civilised world.²⁹

Ancient writers were rather vague about where ‘Arabia’ was located, since it could be anywhere people called Arabs lived—and they lived all over the place in the minds of outsiders.³⁰ For much of antiquity, various Arabias were dispersed across a large area from the Sinai to Mesopotamia, a region which included the Peninsula itself as well as the deserts of southern Jordan, Syria, and Iraq (Figure 1.1).

Over time the Greeks, Romans, and Persians slowly compiled a corpus of geographical knowledge about the Arabian Peninsula, which eventually became the ‘geographical’ Arabia in ancient sources.³¹ In the sixth and fifth centuries BC parts of the Peninsula were a land of fancy, where Herodotus located winged snakes and all manner of exotic creatures and peoples.³² During the reign of the Persian king Darius I (522–486 BC), the Greek explorer Skylax of Caryanda set out to circumnavigate the Peninsula, but serious efforts to explore the region were sporadic until the time of Alexander the Great (336–323 BC).³³ In a rapid campaign, the Macedonian king had overthrown the Persian empire of Darius III, and then took his expedition into Afghanistan and then on into India before an army mutiny forced him to turn back to Iraq. Just before he died, Alexander ordered an expedition to explore the Peninsula. He was probably motivated by the mythical wealth of Arabian resources, specifically spices, incense, and other exotic goods, as well as a desire for continued exploration and conquest.³⁴ Two parallel efforts set out, one travelling via the Gulf and the other through the Red Sea. One part of the expedition landed in South Arabia, where the famous writer and botanist Theophrastus of Eresus (d. 287) recorded that incense and myrrh were discovered by the crew.³⁵ While neither of the two parts of the mission completely achieved their purpose, the undertaking was significant and answered many questions about the topography of the region.³⁶

The Hellenistic rulers who succeeded Alexander remained deeply interested in Arabia, and the texts of explorers, geographers, and other writers and observers created a diverse body of knowledge that was eventually passed on to the Romans (Chapter 2). While various Arabias ‘persisted’ across the Middle East, over time the Peninsula itself was divided up into different parts by Graeco-Roman writers. The southwest of the Peninsula became known as

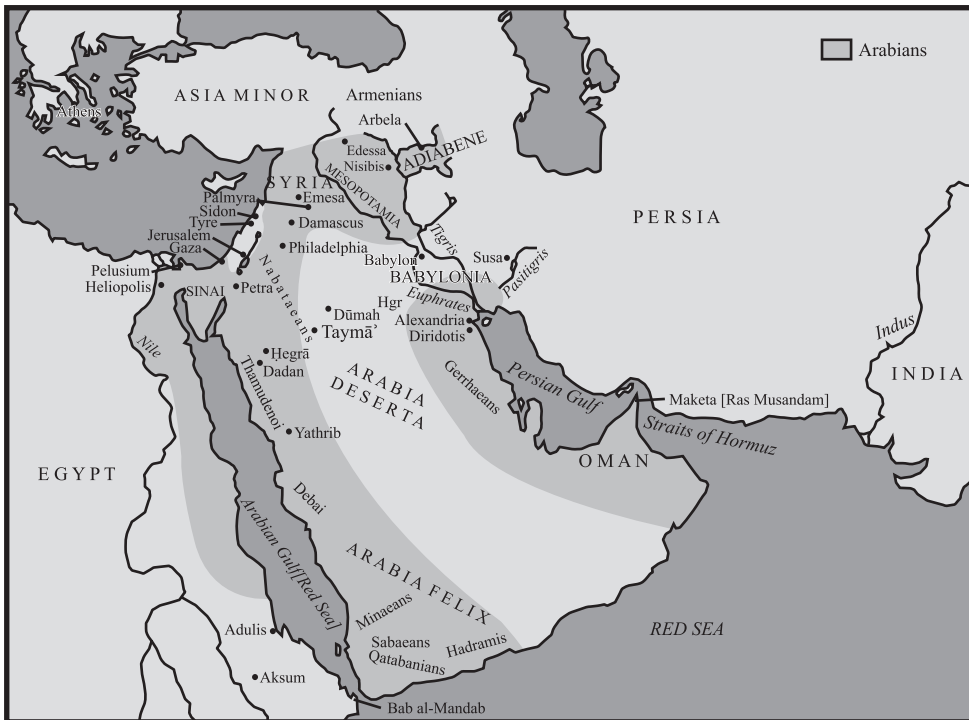


Figure 1.1 Arabs and Arabias in the ancient Middle East at the time of Pompey the Great. Illustration by Aaron Styba.

Arabia Felix (*Eudaemon* in Greek), ‘Happy’, or ‘Lucky’, Arabia, due in part to its fertility and its role as the source of numerous lucrative spices and other attractive goods that were in high demand across the Mediterranean. *Arabia Deserta* was the name given to the barren region that lay between the Fertile Crescent and *Arabia Felix*, a district which includes the modern-day regions of the Rub al-Khali, Nafud, and Dahna deserts, stretching northwards into the Syrian desert. A third label was added later when the *Geography* of Claudius Ptolemy, finished in about AD 150, identified what was then much of the Roman province of Arabia as *Arabia Petraea*, ‘rocky Arabia’.³⁷

These various Arabias were of significant geographical diversity. Some lay inside the Fertile Crescent, a region demarcated by the 200mm rainfall line that governed the ability of agricultural societies to grow crops and tend to livestock without artificial irrigation systems. South of the Crescent lay some of the great oases of the Middle East, such as Dadan (al-Ula) and the city of Palmyra, but in general this region provided significant challenges for settlement, animal husbandry, and agriculture. In stark contrast, parts of *Arabia Felix* benefitted from up to 800mm of annual rainfall (Figure 1.2).³⁸

Following Pompey’s conquest of the Levant and the establishment of Roman power in the Middle East, Roman writers replaced their Greek predecessors as the dominant ethnographic voice in the region. They recognised both *scenitae*, ‘tent-dwelling’ Arabs, as well as those who were settled in towns or cities. Over time the city-dwelling Arabs were subsumed into the expanding number of Roman provinces and the *scenitae*, the Arabs of the desert, tended



Figure 1.2 The Middle East in antiquity. The dotted line represents the 200mm isohyet, the 'rainfall line'. Illustration by Aaron Styba.

to be the Arabs most likely to be mentioned in Roman sources. In AD 106 the kingdom of Nabataea was annexed and became the Roman province of Arabia (Chapter 2). In the fourth century, yet another level of complexity was added when Roman writers began to use the term 'Saracen' to describe the *scenitae*, the Arabs of the desert; slightly earlier, the term 'tayyaye' had emerged in Syriac texts with a similar meaning. Saracens and *tayyaye* differentiated the *scenitae* from other Arabs, like those living in the province of Arabia (Chapter 3). Later, in the fifth and sixth centuries, Roman writers overwhelmingly categorised Saracens/*tayyaye* by recourse to political allegiance and religious choice, reflecting a world increasingly polarised between Rome and Persia and one where the proliferation of religious communities was infused with political allegiance. While modern scholars tend to call the pro-Roman and pro-Persian Arab dynasties of the sixth century 'Jafnids' or 'Nasrids', following the lead of the Arab-Islamic tradition, these names actually have little basis in ancient texts. There, readers find 'Roman Arabs' and 'Persian Arabs'—that is, a label based on political affiliation.³⁹

For Roman writers, the non-Christian Persian Arab enemy was often framed as ‘pagan, bloodthirsty, and bringing cruelty on all’ or as an ‘abominable heathen’—as unhelpful as the earlier language of Ammianus in determining what it meant ‘to be’ an Arab in antiquity.⁴⁰

Tribes and states

Arabs are usually described in terms of tribes or tribal societies. There is a great deal of comparative literature that examines tribes and states from historical and anthropological angles, and some recent research on the Roman- and Persian-Arabs has followed this approach.⁴¹ ‘Tribes’ and ‘states’ are notoriously difficult to define; one prominent anthropologist refers to attempts to demarcate tribes as a ‘tedious and indeed futile enterprise.’⁴² Even though the following criteria do not apply to every situation, it is worth thinking about tribes and states very loosely in terms of different types of sociopolitical organisation. States can be characterised as exploiters and controllers of resources that occupy territory, possessing a diverse population, and being normally governed by a centralised, hierarchical authority. This hierarchy can be represented, for example, by the existence of an emperor and his bureaucracy, tax collection, mechanisms of coercion, and an organised military force. This set of criteria broadly describes the Roman, Persian, and Himyarite states discussed in this book. These criteria are not usually found in tribes, which are defenders of resources and are organisationally decentralised and non-hierarchical. More abstractly, tribes can even be thought of as ‘a series of social, economic and political groupings that provide livelihood and profits, and the development and defence of these.’⁴³ Tribes are normally organised under the leadership of a paramount individual who rules through the consent and respect of his or her peers, but without the hierarchy or bureaucracy associated, for example, with an emperor. Often antagonistic and incompatible,⁴⁴ tribes and states might also share features such as a common religious belief system, as in the example of the Roman empire and many of its Arab allies (Chapters 3 and 4).

The word ‘tribe’ has acquired some negative connotations of cultural or political inferiority as a second-rate step on the sociopolitical evolutionary ‘road’ towards the state. Ethnographic views of nomads have also become entangled with ideas about nomadic tribes, with the idea that tribal society is the ‘political dimension of pastoral nomadism’, further adding to the tribe’s primitive status. By contrast, it is sometimes assumed that states, being ‘rational’ and ‘settled’, possess a greater degree of civilisation.⁴⁵ These ideas are misleading, not least because tribes and states are not always the same thing as nomads and settlers, but also because such artificial divisions obscure the existence of settled tribes, such as the ‘communes’ of South Arabia (Chapter 3), nomadic states such as the Huns under Attila, and other modes of life and production in between. It also implies that tribes and states are somehow separate from one another, with ‘primitive’ groups living in isolation; in the Middle East the opposite has historically been true, with variations of both forms of sociopolitical organisation existing side by side.⁴⁶ Anthropological and historical studies clearly demonstrate the complexity of interactions between nomads, mobile people who obtain food and resources from activities such as pastoralism, and settled peoples, those who do so from agricultural pursuits; nomads sometimes engaged in activities normally associated with settled peoples, and vice versa.⁴⁷ While it is entirely possible that some of the Arabs encountered by the Greeks and Romans followed a nomadic way of life, Graeco-Roman sources do not provide enough objective evidence to make a detailed assessment.⁴⁸

Little is known about the origin or functioning of ancient tribes, making a comparative approach using anthropological studies an attractive way to try to imagine how they might

have operated. There is of course the important caveat that modern and ancient tribes were not necessarily the same in either form or function, but it has nevertheless proven helpful to apply the literature of tribal societies, and especially knowledge of state/tribe relationships, to understand how the Romans and Persians interacted with Arabs at the edges of their territory. Studies of modern tribal leadership are also of interest, because the activities of tribal leaders receive far more attention in ancient sources than tribes themselves, which are usually ignored.⁴⁹ Ancient tribal leadership can therefore be modelled with greater confidence than the sociopolitical organisation and functioning of the tribes themselves—although, as the following discussion shows, there are some pitfalls to this promising approach.

On the basis of modern comparative studies, the essential responsibilities of a tribal chief are to protect the tribe, solve problems, deliver advice and mediation, and provide hospitality and act generously.⁵⁰ Through success in these areas, tribal chiefs acquire a reputation, and the maintenance of that reputation underpins continued success. Where tribes interact with states, some or all of these leadership criteria can be applied to adapting to that relationship, improving the position of the tribe and strengthening the status of the chief. For example, tribal chiefs could become middlemen or mediators between the tribe and state, bartering the manpower resource of the tribe in return for state resources, such as gold, titles, or other blandishments.⁵¹ Since the majority of the sources for pre-Islamic Arabs were written by Greeks or Romans, the activities of tribal leaders are normally only visible when they have an effect on the state. In these contexts, however, it is possible to detect several of the leadership criteria mentioned earlier, especially when the often one-sided sources are read ‘against the grain’ with the assistance of the anthropological literature.

This promising approach to understanding how ancient tribal leaders functioned has its drawbacks. Firstly, it rests on the assumption that Arabs and their leaders lived in tribal societies. While there is no particular reason to doubt that this might be true for much of the pre-Islamic period, by the sixth century the Roman and Persian Arabs clearly exhibit some of the attributes normally associated with states, such as control of resources. This is usually interpreted as a reflection of state formation, akin to what took place amongst the Germanic peoples in the Western Roman empire.⁵² More importantly, it is necessary to consider the implications of the fact that most of the evidence for ancient Arab leadership comes from texts written by Greek or Roman observers. How accurate was the image of Arab leadership that they reported? In a discussion of Frederik Barth’s 1961 study of the Basseri of southern Iran, Philip Salzman noted that the tribe benefitted from a ‘picture of a solidary and unified tribe unquestionably following the commands of their strong and unchallenged ruler.’⁵³ Such an outward view of strength helped the Basseri navigate their environment, and so to some extent the image of the tribe and its leader were *influenced* or even *created* by external factors.⁵⁴ What the ancient texts show us is quite likely the ‘public image’ of the Roman and Persian Arabs, and this image is reinforced by other sources of data such as inscriptions and archaeological evidence. As a result, it is possible that the image of Arab leadership drawn by the sources, and which is discussed at various points throughout this book, has been manipulated and is not an entirely accurate reflection of the actual activities or the positions of Arab leaders. Or, to put it another way:

if a suitably impressive outsider appeared and asked someone [of the tribe] to ‘take me to your leader’ or wondered ‘who’s in charge here?’ his hosts would have to choose a respondent.⁵⁵

An accurate picture about Arab leadership probably lies somewhere in between the occasionally hostile and very often one-sided Graeco-Roman sources, and the more favourable view of independent action offered through the comparative anthropological approach. Roman and Persian Arab leaders, like others who came under the influence of imperial authorities but who sought to carve out a position for themselves and avoid submission to the state, can perhaps best be seen as ‘players in politics, in the struggle for power, independence, and wealth.’⁵⁶ Tribe/state relations could indeed be very one-sided, as the Romans themselves forcefully demonstrated when they rather unceremoniously deposed the Roman Arab leader al-Mundhir in 582 and exiled him to Sicily. But they were also dynamic, complex, and frequently delivered significant benefits to tribal leaders and to the tribes themselves. We shall return to this comparative approach in Chapter 5, to help provide an objective evaluation of the agency of tribal leaders and their relevance to the history of the Middle East more generally.

Sources of information

Imperial ‘outsiders’, not Arab ‘insiders’, dominate the sources of information for pre-Islamic Arab history.⁵⁷ The bulk of the material comprises literary texts written in Greek, Latin, or Syriac (a dialect of Aramaic). Such sources also constitute almost all of the contemporary witnesses, although several important Greek and Syriac texts from later periods preserve older material that is otherwise fragmented, lost, or unknown. Other contemporary, or near-contemporary, sources are the mass of inscriptions from across the Middle East, written in a variety of languages and scripts, together with a small clutch of archaeological evidence and a tiny number of literary texts from the Parthian and Sasanian Persian empires. An important group of later texts is the literary sources from the Arab-Islamic tradition. Written in the majority by Arab Muslims, these are nevertheless ‘outsider’ texts for pre-Islamic history.⁵⁸ Many of these different resources have come down to us incomplete, damaged, or known only from later compilations, but despite these disadvantages they offer a surprisingly detailed portrait of Arabs and particularly their relationship with the states of the ancient Middle East.

Graeco-Roman and Syriac literary sources

The Graeco-Roman and Syriac sources come from a range of genres. These include hagiographies (lives of saints and martyrs), religious and ecclesiastical histories, ‘classicising’ histories (those written in the style of the great Greek and Roman historians such as Thucydides and Tacitus), geographical texts, and digests of older works. Frequently overlapping in content, these sources offer the useful opportunity to examine the same events and individuals from a range of different perspectives.

Some of the texts used in this volume include, for instance, the famous *Geography* of Strabo, a prominent scholar and a contemporary of the Roman emperor Augustus (28/7 BC–AD 14).⁵⁹ Strabo, together with an earlier historian, Diodorus Siculus, transmitted a great deal of information about Arabia culled from writers of the Hellenistic period. Strabo also chronicled the expedition of his friend Aelius Gallus to *Arabia Felix* (Chapter 2). Historians of the early imperial period include the incomplete text of the Roman senator Cassius Dio, who flourished in the early third century AD. His Greek classicising history, written in the style of Tacitus and Livy, is important for understanding the reigns of emperors active in the east such

as Trajan (AD 98–117) and Dio's contemporary Septimius Severus (AD 193–212) (Chapter 2).⁶⁰ Another warrior emperor active on the eastern frontier was Julian (AD 360–3), whose exploits were chronicled in Latin by the Roman officer Ammianus Marcellinus, staff officer to the Roman general Ursicinus on a number of eastern campaigns and witness to Julian's disastrous invasion of Persia.⁶¹ Ammianus provides the first unambiguous literary mention of the term 'Saracen' as a way to describe Arabs of the desert (Chapter 3).

One of the most famous classicising texts of Late Antiquity is the *History of the Wars* by Procopius of Caesarea. Along with *Buildings* and the scandalous *Secret History*, Procopius wrote the *History of the Wars* in Greek. Procopius was a well-educated bureaucrat who served for seventeen years as the personal secretary to Belisarius, a prominent general during the reign of the Roman emperor Justinian (AD 527–65). Procopius was an eyewitness to much of what he describes, and served in both the Middle East and the Mediterranean as Belisarius fought Persians, Vandals, and Ostrogoths. He had access to court documents and the decision-making elite of the Roman state, and the *History* discusses the key Roman Arab allies of the sixth century, especially the Roman Arab al-Harith, who received an extraordinary level of support from Justinian; Procopius also chronicled the Persian Arabs and their leaders in some detail (Chapter 4).⁶² A near contemporary of Procopius, Menander the Guardsman, wrote a Greek *History* known only from excerpts and copies made much later in the tenth-century *Excerpta*, a compilation created on the orders of the Byzantine emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus (AD 913–59).⁶³ According to what little is known of his biography, Menander seems to have spent much of his time gambling at the hippodrome in Constantinople and trying to seduce actresses, but in his spare time he thoughtfully copied down a great deal about diplomatic and military relations between the Romans and Persians, including the text of an important treaty in AD 561/2 that illustrates the changing position of the Arabs between the two empires (Chapter 4).⁶⁴ Another text partially preserved through the *Excerpta* is the classicising history of Malchus of Philadelphia (modern Amman, in Jordan), whose history likely appeared sometime around the turn of the sixth century. Malchus chronicled the flight of a Persian Arab named Amorkesos to Roman territory, and his subsequent negotiations with imperial authorities (Chapter 3).⁶⁵ Parts of Malchus' text also appeared in the *Suda*, a work compiled once again at the direction of Constantine VII, and the *Bibliotheca*, a digest of books read by Photius, a ninth-century patriarch of Constantinople.⁶⁶ The *Bibliotheca* also recorded some of the work of Nonnosus, a Roman career diplomat from a family of individuals who carried out missions in the Red Sea region for Anastasius (491–518), Justin I (518–27), and Justinian.⁶⁷ Theophylact Simocatta, generally held to be the last classicising historian of antiquity, wrote a 'ludicrously convoluted and ornate' Greek history during the reign of Heraclius (610–41), covering the period between 582 and 603.⁶⁸

While Ammianus was unashamedly pagan in his views,⁶⁹ Procopius and many of his sixth-century classicising generation were Christians, reflecting an important shift in the religious and political landscape of the Roman empire in late antiquity. Between the late third and early fourth centuries Christianity gained traction in the Roman world and then, during the reign of Constantine (306–37), the persecution of Christians came to an end with the Edict of Milan (313). This shift fostered an intellectual dimension for Christianity that spurred the development of theological and historical writing, and hagiographies. Chronicles and ecclesiastical histories detailed the affairs of the church, including the numerous disputes about the nature of Christ that raged in the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries and beyond.⁷⁰ Covering a whole range of topics beyond theological concerns, including imperial political affairs and interstate conflicts, Christian texts are essential to understanding the late Roman empire. The fifth-century establishment of the Church of the East in the Persian empire also stimulated

the production of hagiographical texts and chronicles, although far fewer have survived (see the section on Persian sources, below).⁷¹

Christian texts often sought to teach and moralise in order to demonstrate the superiority of the Christian God over non-Christian religions. Stories of Christianisation and the 'civilising' benefits that came with it were favoured vehicles to achieve this goal, especially in texts covering encounters between Christian holy men and non-Romans such as Arabs.⁷² Such encounters took place in the eastern deserts of what is now Palestine, Syria, and Jordan, where numerous monks and hermits 'retired' for periods of contemplation.⁷³ Their exploits, a favourite topic for hagiographers, often featured the introduction of Christianity to aimless, wandering Arabs. Once 'cured' of their maladies, demons, and turned away ('converted')⁷⁴ from their false gods, Arabs could be brought into the *oikumene*, the civilised, Christian Roman commonwealth. Hagiographic texts thus tend to be didactic and rhetorical, but they are also of immense interest for understanding how Arabs and other outsiders adopted Christianity. Well-known authors of saints' lives in Latin and Greek include the famous Church Father St Jerome,⁷⁵ as well as Cyril of Scythopolis, whose *Lives of the Monks of Palestine* illustrates how Arab groups, living at the edges of Roman authority, adopted Christianity and came under Roman political control.⁷⁶

Like hagiographers, ecclesiastical historians and chroniclers were also very interested in the Christianisation of barbarians. A number of overlapping histories from the fourth and fifth centuries written by authors such as Theodoret (born in Antioch, 393), Socrates Scholasticus (born in Constantinople, 380), Sozomen (born in Palestine, died 448/9), and Rufinus (born in Italy, c. 345) offer a surprisingly detailed view of interactions between Arabs and Romans along the frontiers of the empire.⁷⁷ Several of these texts relate the famous story of the Arab queen Mavia and her revolt against the Roman emperor Valens, and offer a glimpse into the legal terminology used by the Roman state to classify and manage its Arab allies (Chapter 3). Theodoret also wrote a number of hagiographies, including that of the famous pillar saint Symeon the Stylite. This man was celebrated for his healing miracles and attracted a diverse group of pilgrims, including Arabs, to his shrine in northern Syria (Chapter 3). An important late antique chronicle was written by John Malalas, a native of Antioch (Antakya in Turkey), one of the most important cities in the Roman empire. John's *Chronicle* ran to eighteen books, spanning a time period between Adam and Eve and the reign of Justinian. Malalas, who worked in the imperial civil service, is a key source for affairs in Antioch and Constantinople, as well as the empire of Justinian and the activities of numerous Arab leaders.⁷⁸ A late Greek ecclesiastical history was written by Evagrius, a lawyer from Epiphania (Hama) who was employed by Gregory, the Patriarch of Antioch (570–92).⁷⁹ Amongst other notices, Evagrius recorded the Christianisation of the Persian Arab leader al-Numan in the 590s (Chapter 4).

Ecclesiastical histories and hagiographies were often written in Greek, but they were also compiled in Syriac, which emerged as an important vehicle for Christian literature in Syria and Iraq. One of the most important Syriac texts was the *Ecclesiastical History* of John of Ephesus, a Roman bishop who lived between c. 507 and 588. The surviving parts of John's work provide a wealth of detail about the Roman Arabs of the sixth century and their role in the church politics of the Roman state.⁸⁰ John compiled his text in opposition to views about Christian belief frequently promoted by the Roman emperors of his time. These ideas were derived from the famous Council of Chalcedon, convened in 451 by the emperor Marcian in order to resolve the theological differences plaguing the empire. The Council (whose adherents became known as 'Chalcedonians') had adopted specific ideas about the nature of Christ that were fiercely rejected in some parts of the Middle East, including by many Christians in

the Persian empire. A great number of the opponents of Chalcedon, including John, belonged to a group that came to be known variously as the anti-Chalcedonians, the Monophysites, or the Miaphysites (Chapter 3).⁸¹ The bishop was imprisoned for his views by the Roman emperor Justin II (AD 565–74), but was later released and participated in the complex negotiations between different Monophysite factions presided over by the Roman Arab leader al-Mundhir. John also wrote a series of hagiographies, which offer an important insight into the activities of al-Mundhir and his father, al-Harith.⁸²

Several Syriac texts were composed in the frontier regions of the Roman empire and are important witnesses to the role of Arabs in the Romano-Persian conflicts of late antiquity. The *Chronicle of Pseudo-Joshua the Stylite*, an anonymous text written from the perspective of a monk from Edessa (Urfa in Turkey), noted how Arab raiders enriched themselves through booty and plunder, and described the close relationship between the Persian king Kavadh and the Arab leader, al-Numan, on campaign together.⁸³ Another important Syriac text is the *Chronicle of Pseudo-Zachariah Rhetor*. Assembled in the late 560s, it included a Syriac translation of a lost Greek original as well as a host of other material shedding light on a wide range of events, including the massacre of Christians at Najran in South Arabia in the 520s (Chapter 4). The additional texts were probably added by a monk from Amida (Diyarbakir in Turkey). Like Edessa, Amida was frequently swept up in the recurring struggles between Rome and Persia and their Arab militias for influence in Mesopotamia in the fifth and sixth centuries.⁸⁴

A number of Greek and Syriac Christian texts covering activities of Arabs and Arab leaders were written or compiled well after the sixth century. These include the famous *Chronicle* of Theophanes the Confessor (d. 818), written in Greek. The *Chronicle* organised religious and secular events in a coherent chronology that began with the Creation. Possessing an immensely complex source history, the *Chronicle* makes numerous mentions of Arabs and their relationship with the Roman and Persian states, and records items of political and diplomatic interest such as the arrival in Constantinople, in 563, of the Roman Arab leader al-Harith to discuss the succession of his son al-Mundhir with Justinian.⁸⁵ The *Chronicle* is also of vital interest for a murky period around the turn of the sixth century, when various Arab groups appeared to jockey for position in northwestern Arabia (Chapter 4). An anonymous Syriac text records the hagiography of Ahudemmeh, the sixth-century bishop of Tikrit in Iraq who introduced Christianity to Arabs in the Jazira, the lands between Mosul and northern Syria.⁸⁶ Three late Syriac texts—the anonymous *Chronicle to 1234* (perhaps written in Edessa in the first half of the thirteenth century), the *Chronicle* of Michael the Syrian, patriarch of Antioch (1166–99), and the *Chronicle* of Bar Hebraeus, the Primate (Maphrian) of the east in 1264—also contain a great deal of information about the activities of Arabs in both Rome and Persia. They are of particular importance as witnesses to earlier texts that have since become lost or damaged, such as parts of John of Ephesus, and the text of the Monophysite patriarch Dionysius of Tel Mahre (818–845).⁸⁷ Dionysius himself was sometimes thought to be the author of an anonymous ninth-century Christian Syriac text from the monastery of Zuqnin near Amida. The *Chronicle of Pseudo-Dionysius*, also known as the *Chronicle of Zuqnin*, preserved lost parts of the *Ecclesiastical History* of John of Ephesus and offers an important narrative of the Najran episode.⁸⁸ A late Christian text known as the *Chronicle of Seert*, preserved in an Arabic version, compiled a mass of material, much of which was originally written in Syriac. Its sources include histories of the leaders of the Church of the East in the Persian empire, the *catholicoi*, and of the Persian kings. The *Chronicle* contains an important narrative of the Persian Arab court towards the end of the sixth century (Chapter 4).⁸⁹

Literary texts written in the Parthian and Sasanian empires

Unfortunately, very few sources of any kind have survived from Rome's eastern neighbour, Persia, either during the Parthian period (c. 141 BC–AD 224) or the time of the Sasanian dynasty (AD 224–650). This means that much of Parthian history, and indeed a large amount of Sasanian history, must be constructed from texts written in the Roman empire.⁹⁰ A rare literary witness from the Parthian state is the group of cuneiform texts known as the *Astronomical Diaries*, produced in the temples of Mesopotamia. The *Diaries* mostly covered celestial events, but also logged food prices, weather, and events of political significance, including Arab raids and attempts at extortion (Chapter 2).⁹¹ For the Sasanian period, no official Persian documents survive, although royal texts such as the *Kwady Namagh* ('Book of Kings') were used by later authors writing in Arabic or Persian.⁹² Syriac Christian hagiography produced in the Persian empire sometimes mentions Arabs, such as the *Legend of Mar Qardagh*, probably written in the seventh century and looking back to a period of turmoil under the Sasanian king Shapur II (309–79).⁹³ One rare contemporary Syriac witness, the late seventh-century Christian *Khuzistan Chronicle*, offers a precious glimpse of the activities of Arabs in Iraq, including the affairs of the final Persian Arab leader, al-Numan (Chapter 4).⁹⁴ It should be noted here that the numerous seals, rock reliefs, and coins that have done so much to enhance our understanding of Persian history have regrettably little content related to Arabs; one exception is the Bishapur IV relief, thought to show Bahram II (276–93) receiving an Arab delegation, but this is by no means certain (Chapter 3).⁹⁵

Inscriptions and archaeological sources

Numerous inscriptions of interest to historians of pre-Islamic Arabia have been discovered across the Middle East. Some of the most recent finds include the stunning array of texts, discovered in 2014 by the *Mission archéologique franco-saoudienne de Najran* at Hima in southern Saudi Arabia, that have added immeasurably to our understanding of the development of Arabic, as well as an equally stunning discovery mentioning the Roman Arab leader al-Mundhir, found at Tall al-Umayri East in 2009 in the southern suburbs of Amman.⁹⁶

The inscriptions available to historians of pre-Islamic Arabia fall into a variety of categories and were written in a number of texts and languages. Some are graffiti, written on rocks by shepherds, nomads, and other everyday people in dialects of Ancient North Arabian in the deserts of Syria and Jordan (Chapter 2).⁹⁷ Others are monumental texts in a variety of languages and scripts incised in stone, commissioned by community elites, kings, princes, and religious leaders throughout the Middle East, and especially in South Arabia. As the most recent discoveries show, texts continue to be found at various spots throughout the Arabian Peninsula and their study is one of the most exciting areas of modern research in the field. Many of these texts shed light on the relations between the rulers of Himyar and their Arab allies.⁹⁸

One of the oldest inscriptions in the Arabic language, but written using the Nabatean Aramaic script, is a royal epitaph discovered at al-Namara in Syria and now in the Louvre (Chapter 3).⁹⁹ Later Syrian texts include three known examples of a recognisably Arabic script, two of which are from Christian sites (Chapter 4).¹⁰⁰ In the south of the old Roman province of Arabia, modern northwestern Saudi Arabia, texts written in a 'transitional' script between Aramaic and Arabic shed light on the development of the Arabic script, while those found at Hima mentioned above are very similar to the examples from Syria. Amazingly, they are the first of their kind found in South Arabia (Chapters 3, 4, and 5).¹⁰¹ A number

of Greek inscriptions, including some commissioned by, or relating to, Rome's Arab allies al-Harith and al-Mundhir, come from the territory of modern Syria and Jordan. Found mostly at Christian sites, these texts are usually dedications recording the construction of buildings; they also reveal the role of Arabs in patronising the popular martyr cult of St Sergius (Chapter 4).¹⁰² A couple of texts from the Persian empire, the Paikuli inscription from Kurdistan and the autobiography of Shapur I, both from the third century, have content relevant to Arab history.¹⁰³ Crucially, this admittedly disparate group of epigraphic material offers a largely contemporary witness, and given that much of it was commissioned or written by Arabs themselves, it offers the most important set of 'insider' sources.

Many of these inscriptions were discovered at archaeological sites, such as churches or monasteries, that illustrate the physical impact of Arabs on the late antique landscape. In contrast to the view provided by the Arab-Islamic tradition (below), only a few buildings from the Roman east can be connected with any confidence to any of the Roman-allied Arab individuals who appear in the Graeco-Roman and Syriac literary sources. Most of these, such as the churches of St Sergius at Tall al-Umayri East or Nitl in Jordan, the martyrium¹⁰⁴ at al-Burj, near Dumayr in Syria, or the fortress of Rusafa-Sergiopolis near Raqqa, are linked with the Roman Arab leader al-Harith and his son. In Iraq, very little archaeological investigation has been carried out at al-Hira, the urban site usually connected with the Persian Arabs, although an Iraqi team from the University of Kufa has carried out a series of rescue excavations in recent years (Chapter 3). While the prospect of work in Syria and parts of Iraq remains grim, archaeological work continues in Jordan and Saudi Arabia, as well as at various locations in the Emirates and Oman.

Muslim literary texts

Muslim texts written in Arabic (and sometimes Persian) in the centuries following the Muslim conquests are an enormously important group of texts. Their use as historical sources remains highly controversial and is a matter still fiercely debated, particularly amongst scholars of Islamic studies. This is because it is to these late textual sources that questions about key events—the origins of Islam, the life of Muhammad, and other critical matters of the sixth, seventh, and eighth centuries—must normally be asked.

The creation of these texts was greatly influenced by what Robert Hoyland has called 'the seismic changes in Middle East politics' that accompanied the rapid development of the Muslim community. Some tribes and individuals were elevated, while others were suppressed, in order to conform to the political realities of the day as different groups manoeuvred for control in Damascus, Cairo, and Baghdad. The literary texts were written against this complex political background.¹⁰⁵ Much of the material compiled by later writers depended on a chain of informants who passed information, often orally, down to its eventual place in a written text. Doubt has been cast on the authenticity of these chains, with questions about the reliability of oral transmission, together with concerns about embellishment, invention, or distortion thrown open for debate. Similar unease has been expressed about the substantial corpus of poems preserved from oral versions circulating in pre-Islamic Arabia, that were only compiled much later into written editions, often under similar political and cultural pressures. The utility of these poems as sources for the pre-Islamic period is thus also often called into doubt, alongside the epic accounts of battles between the tribes.¹⁰⁶ On the other hand, as Aziz al-Azmeh has pointed out, these historiographical concerns apply in some form or another to historical and literary texts of *any* era; as a result, it has been argued that there is nothing particularly special about the Arab Islamic sources that historians are not equipped to deal with, and that attacks on the authenticity of chains of informants and the integrity of oral

transmission express undue scepticism.¹⁰⁷ Indeed, one might argue that the main impediment to the use of these texts by historians working outside Islamic studies remains the lack of easily available critical editions, and particularly critical editions in translation for those without the requisite skills in Arabic and other languages, such as the SUNY-sponsored translation of the history of al-Tabari. In contrast to the majority of the Graeco-Roman sources and a large percentage of the Syriac texts, a great deal of work remains to be done on the Muslim-era Arabic and Persian texts in this regard.

Questions of Islamic origins and the early history of the caliphate are of great interest to historians of late antiquity. In a sombre assessment, however, Garth Fowden noted that 'most ancient historians are culturally as well as educationally unprepared for either Arabic or Islam.'¹⁰⁸ While this may seem controversial to some, it is true that many Roman historians (for example) learn Greek and Latin but only little or no Arabic, Syriac, Armenian, or Sogdian; there is a surplus of languages relevant to late antique studies, and it is impossible to acquire the necessary proficiency in all of them. One possible approach to this problem with regard to the Arabic sources is to look for areas of corroboration with Graeco-Roman and Syriac texts. Such correlations are often to be found, and allow an additional voice to be brought to the assessment of a particular event with a certain confidence.¹⁰⁹ On the other hand, corroborating material is frequently missing, and here problems remain. For example, according to Ibn Habib, a Baghdadi philologist who died in 860, there was an unbroken line of Arab kings at al-Hira for 520 years.¹¹⁰ Other sources credit these individuals, the Persian Arabs or Nasrids, with the standardisation of the Arabic script in Iraq and the patronisation of an opulent court celebrated in the Arab Islamic tradition.¹¹¹ Yet none of these claims find any corroboration in the Graeco-Roman or Syriac sources, and the lack of systematic excavation at al-Hira brings no support from archaeology or epigraphy. Similarly, another author, Hamza al-Isfahani, from the city of Isfahan in Persia, offers a well-known list of Roman Arab (Jafnid) rulers that associates them with a plethora of buildings and locations in the Roman empire.¹¹² Some of the rulers are not known from any other source and strenuous efforts to connect the sheer range of archaeological sites to Jafnid individuals have come up short.¹¹³

This does not necessarily mean that Ibn Habib or Hamza al-Isfahani are wrong and of little use to the historian. On the other hand, attempts to apply the Arab Islamic texts at face value to pre-Islamic history have not always been successful. Where correlations cannot be found, and in the absence of critical editions, the texts must, like any other, be used with an appropriate degree of analytical caution. Yet it can also be noted that the often very different picture of pre-Islamic Arab history provided by the Arab Islamic sources is, in and of itself, of great value. If there is no evidence for an opulent Nasrid court in the pre-Islamic sources, but this idea or viewpoint then becomes of interest to a different group of people much later on, we must ask why this is the case. Thinking about that question sheds light on how different peoples, places, and times could be understood and memorialised in very different ways, and, in the case of the Roman and Persian Arabs, why they achieved such fame in the Arab-Islamic tradition long after they had been deposed, exiled, or murdered by their imperial patrons.¹¹⁴

Germans and Arabs

The dominance of 'outsider' sources means that the history of Arabs in the pre-Islamic period is necessarily seen through the prism of their neighbours. Arab tribes and Arab leaders are an integral part of Roman, Persian, and Himyarite history, and so from a methodological perspective, the framework of imperial power in the Middle East is tremendously important. This framework can be appreciated from an anthropological perspective, in terms of tribe/state relationships, as discussed above. To these approaches can be added an historical

viewpoint that compares Arabs to other non-Roman or non-Persian peoples in the ancient world. The most suitable analytical sounding board for this is provided by the detailed studies of Germanic peoples in the late antique western Roman empire.

In the late twentieth century, the European Science Foundation launched an ambitious project that aimed to understand how the relations between the Roman empire and its Germanic neighbours, such as the Goths, Franks, and Vandals, influenced the creation of Medieval Europe. This project, the *Transformation of the Roman World*, showed how the leaders of these groups appropriated Roman political symbols, religious ideas, and aspects of Mediterranean imperial culture to form the framework of the 'barbarian kingdoms'—the polities of early medieval Europe.¹¹⁵ One of the legacies of this process was the transmission of Roman culture into the Middle Ages, permanently implanting it in the European world. Clovis, the Frankish king buried at the Basilique de Saint-Denis in northern Paris, was one of the most famous inheritors of Roman culture and tradition in western Europe, and stands as a useful example of how the leader of a once peripheral people eventually drew much of his political and cultural 'language' from the old imperial centre. Clovis was awarded the esteemed Roman position of consul by the emperor Anastasius (491–518), and wore the purple robes of a Roman Christian *imperator* as he left church and dispensed largesse to his followers.¹¹⁶ Neither Clovis nor the Frankish kingdom that later gave its name to France make much sense without a consideration of their Roman heritage.¹¹⁷

Recent research on Arabs and their place in the ancient world keeps the outcome of the *Transformation* project in mind. The Germanic leaders in Europe enjoyed a close relationship with the Roman state in both peace and war over a period of several hundred years.¹¹⁸ During this time they experienced prolonged and intense contact with Roman culture, political thought, military technology, trade, diplomatic agents, and so on. The result was a process of 'acculturation', a swapping of certain aspects of cultural values and the appropriation of technology and ideas.¹¹⁹ The Romans supported this process, not least because they got something out of it that they badly needed: manpower for their armies. The Franks, in particular, provided not only thousands of regular infantry, but also became an important faction in the Roman officer corps. Anticipating the dual role of Clovis as Roman consul and barbarian king, many of these senior Frankish officers appear in Roman sources with hybrid or 'double' identities. One well-known example was a Frank named Mallobaudes, who appears in the text of Ammianus Marcellinus holding a senior position in the Roman military hierarchy, but who is also simultaneously described as 'king of the Franks'.¹²⁰

This sort of 'double identity' is very much the hallmark of the 'barbarian' experience in the Roman empire. Barbarian aristocrats were courted by Roman agents, who offered titles, membership in the Roman aristocracy, cash, and other forms of social or political advancement, including conversion to Christianity, which itself became an important marker of political membership after the early fourth century. Managing these offers while still maintaining control over large groups of people—who were not necessarily receiving the same promising deals—helped to create leaders who were half-Roman and half-barbarian. It also had another, important effect, because it altered social and political organisation amongst the barbarians themselves. This process is usually understood as a type of state formation, whereby powerful individuals centralised authority around themselves and their retinue, resulting in the development of stratified hierarchies and sometimes institutions normally associated with states.¹²¹ State formation was just one possible result of state/tribe interactions, and in the case of western Europe, the barbarian kingdoms were to some extent 'produced' by several centuries of the very close contacts between Romans and Germans. By the time that Roman power collapsed in Europe, barbarian leaders were well on their way to going from being

Germanic outsiders to being imperial insiders, and were remarkably well placed to offer a form of ‘alternative Roman’ leadership to the equally mixed populations of France, Spain, and eventually Italy itself.¹²² By the sixth century, the map of Europe included the Ostrogothic kingdom in Italy, the Vandals in North Africa, the Visigoths in Spain, and the Burgundians and Franks in France. All could trace their origins to the long interaction between Roman authorities and the Germanic peoples in Europe.

The history of Arabs in the pre-Islamic Middle East followed—at first—a rather similar trajectory.¹²³ The first major contact between the Romans and Arabs can be traced back to the first century BC, with more intense levels of interaction beginning in the second and third centuries AD. In the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries, individual Arab leaders rose to the fore, concluding advantageous alliances with the Roman state and receiving titles, gold, and imperial commissions in return. Adopting Christianity led to a closer political relationship between Arabs and Romans and assisted the process of acculturation. Along the edges of the Persian empire, similar developments appear to have been underway, although they are far harder to trace in the fourth and fifth centuries due to difficulties with our sources. Further south, the Himyarite kingdom elevated individual Arab leaders such as Hujr (Chapter 3) to represent its authority in northern and central Arabia, and this seems to have had some unintended consequences (Chapters 4 and 5).

By the sixth century AD, Arab elites in contact with Rome and Persia began to look quite a lot like kings of small but powerful fiefdoms, as power crystallised around their leadership. In short, the Arabs were very much headed in the same direction as their Germanic counterparts in Europe—with one key difference. Roman power would collapse in the west, allowing Germanic leaders and their proto-states to emerge as kings and kingdoms. In the east, both Roman and Persian power remained intact well into the seventh century, and both empires actually terminated their key Arab alliances between 582 and c. 602/6, exiling or killing their leaders (Chapter 4). The processes of barbarian state formation did not, then, result in the same endpoint in the east as in the west, but Arab elites nevertheless became extremely powerful by allying themselves with the Roman and Persian empires. Arab leaders appear in our sources as state negotiators, religious leaders, and formidable warriors, showing that strong Arab leadership was a feature of pre-Islamic late antiquity and thus predated the Muslim conquests (see Chapter 5). Like the emergence of Germanic warrior-kings in Europe, Arab leadership had a lot to do with the framework of Roman (and Persian) power.

One further key difference between the barbarian experience in the west and the east can be noted. In western Europe, the barbarians and the Romans interacted in the frontier zones of the empire without the addition of a major third party, although groups such as the Huns appeared periodically to challenge the status quo. In the east, though, there was not just one other major state to offset Roman power, there were two: Persia and Himyar. In the time-frame covered by this book the Persian empire was ruled first by the Parthians (Chapter 2) and then by the Sasanians (Chapters 3–4). The Himyarite state conquered its neighbours in about AD 275, and then aggressively conquered much of the Arabian Peninsula. In between, across the deserts of Syria, Iraq, and what is now northern Saudi Arabia, lay numerous Arab peoples—and it is to them that we now turn.

Notes

1 Hoyland 2001. See Shahid 1984a, 1989b, and 1995–2010.

2 Hainthaler 2007, updating Trimmingham 1979.

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- 3 The terrorist group goes by various names including ISIS, IS, ISIL, and Daesh. Here I follow Weiss and Hassan 2015.
- 4 Foster and Foster 2011.
- 5 Bryce 2014; Sahner 2014.
- 6 Marozzi 2014.
- 7 Burns 2007.
- 8 Veyne 2015.
- 9 Mansel 2016.
- 10 See for example the American Schools of Oriental Research's *Cultural Heritage Initiatives* and its exceptionally detailed reports of damage in Syria and Iraq; (www.asor-syrianheritage.org/); Ross Burn's *Monuments of Syria* online (<http://monument-sofsyria.com/>); the damage newsletter from the NGO Heritage for Peace (www.heritageforpeace.org/); and the Iraq Crisis mailing list (<http://oi-archive.uchicago.edu/OI/IRAQ/iraqcrisis.html>) (all accessed April 12, 2019).
- 11 See for example Wood (G) 2015, Saul 2015, and Callimachi 2015.
- 12 See <http://shirin-international.org/> and n. 10.
- 13 Amongst the extremely large number of texts covering Late Antiquity and the nature of the discipline, see for example the essays in Johnson 2012 (ed.), as well as Cameron (Av.) 2013 and the first volume of the *Journal of Late Antiquity* (2008). Most recently Garth Fowden has proposed extending the temporal and spatial limits even further in a very interesting and provocative book entitled *Before and After Muhammad: The First Millennium Refocused* (Fowden (G) 2014).
- 14 On this term, see the discussion in this chapter.
- 15 Fisher (ed.) 2015.
- 16 See Chapters 3, 4, and 5.
- 17 See Chapter 3.
- 18 The term 'Paleo-Islam' was coined by Aziz al-Azmeh (al-Azmeh 2014a and 2014b). See too as an example of collaborative approaches between Islamic/pre-Islamic scholars, the work of the International Qur'anic Studies Association (<https://iqsaweb.wordpress.com/>) and the Nangeroni Meetings (e.g. http://www.4enoch.org/wiki4/index.php?title=Nangeroni_Meetings) (accessed January 30, 2019).
- 19 Anderson 2013; Barr 2012; Neff 2014; Tran and Weaver 2014; Bunzel 2015.
- 20 Phillips 2016.
- 21 See Macdonald 2009b for an authoritative study of this problem for the period before Late Antiquity; see also Fisher (ed.) 2015, Chapter 1.
- 22 See for example Shahid 1984a, 1989b, 1995–2010; Healey 1989; Retsö 2003; see now Fisher 2011a, Webb 2016, and Hoyland 2017, and Chapter 5.
- 23 Herodotus, 8.144, trans. Godley; Macdonald 2009b; Hall 1997.
- 24 Macdonald 2009b: 279.
- 25 Hoyland 2014: 267–8, for 'outsider' and 'insider' sources for Arab history.
- 26 On the term and its usage see for example Dauge 1981; Pohl and Reimitz (eds) 1998; Gruen 2011; Woolf 2011; Maas 2012.
- 27 Ammianus, 31.2.2, trans. Rolfe.
- 28 Ammianus, 14.4.3–6, trans. Rolfe.
- 29 See Shaw 1982, especially the discussion of Aristotle, 17–20.
- 30 Macdonald 2009b.
- 31 Macdonald *et al.* 2015: 13.
- 32 Herodotus, 2.75; 3.107–13.

- 33 Herodotus, 4.44.
- 34 Arrian, *Anabasis* 7.20.1–8; Potts 1990, vol 2: 2–3.
- 35 Theophrastus, *Enquiry into Plants* 9.4.4; Retsö 2003: 268–9, and more generally on Alexander 263–81; see too Arrian, *Indica*, 43; Potts 1990, vol. 2: 5–7.
- 36 Macdonald 2001 [2009a, V]: 11–14.
- 37 Hoyland 2001; Sanlaville 2010; Fisher (ed.) 2015.
- 38 For geography and climate in South Arabia and discussion of the climate in *Arabia Felix* and *Arabia Deserta*, see Yule 2007: 14–17; Hoyland 2001: 2–5. For a general geographical background of the Fertile Crescent in antiquity: Whittow 1996: 15–37; Isaac 2000: 9–14; Bowersock 1983: 5–11; Kennedy and Riley 1990: 24–8; Dijkstra and Fisher (eds) 2014. See also Fowden (G) 1993 and Fowden (EK) 1999.
- 39 Hoyland 2014; Fisher (ed.) 2015; Fisher and Wood 2016.
- 40 *Life of Symeon the Stylite the Younger*, 186–7, on the Nasrid leader al-Mundhir (504–554); Evagrius, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.22, on the Nasrid leader al-Numan (d. 602/4). On terminology, see Fisher (ed.) 2015: 6–8, and Fisher and Wood 2016.
- 41 E.g. Fisher 2014, 2017; Dijkstra and Fisher (eds) 2014. The literature on tribe/state relations is significant. See, for studies with ancient content, Khoury and Kostiner (eds) 1990; Tapper (ed.) 1983; Mundy and Musallam (eds) 2000. See also Fisher 2011a and 2014.
- 42 Tapper 1990: 49.
- 43 Salzman 2014: 83–4; quote from Lancaster and Lancaster 2004: 53; Tapper 1990: 50.
- 44 Salzman 2014: 84.
- 45 See the discussion in Tapper 1990; quote from p. 54.
- 46 Tapper 1990; on communes, see Beeston 1976 and Robin 2015a: 92. Numerous tribal ‘settled cultivators with little or no leaning toward pastoralism or nomadism’ are known throughout the Middle East (Tapper 1990: 54).
- 47 See for instance Macdonald 1993: 316–17, [2009d] discussing crop-sowing carried out by nomads in ancient Syria. In general the literature on the terms ‘tribe’ and ‘state’, together with literature on nomads and settlement, is vast. In general for the complexities of tribe/state and nomad/settled interactions as outlined here, see Salzman 1980 (ed.); Salzman and Galaty (eds) 1990; Khazanov 1994; Salzman and Fabietti (eds) 1996; Ginat and Khazanov (eds) 1998; Wickham 2005: 305–6; Szuchman 2008.
- 48 See Fisher 2011a, Chapters 2 and 3.
- 49 The framework has been established by a number of publications addressing ancient Arabs. These include Haldon and Conrad (eds) 2004; Leder and Streck (eds) 2005; Szuchman 2008; Dijkstra and Fisher (eds) 2014; Genequand and Robin (eds) 2015. See also Whittow 1999. For some of the pitfalls, see Lindner 1982.
- 50 As established by (for example), Lancaster 1997: 87; Lancaster and Lancaster 2004, 34–5, 39–41, and 2015, 58, 64–71; Garthwaite 2009, 37–9; Beck 1986, 214–15; Salzman 2004a: 79, 301–25; Salzman 2004b: 90–1; Salzman 1974; Caton 1990: 102; Tapper (ed.) 1983: 56.
- 51 Salzman 1974; Fisher 2017.
- 52 See the discussion in Fisher 2011a, Chapter 3.
- 53 Salzman 2004b: 90.
- 54 Tapper (1990: 55) also notes that at various points in the history of the Middle East tribes themselves were created by external factors. See Chapter 5.
- 55 Lindner 1982: 699.
- 56 Quote from Salzman 2014: 90, referring to the Rwala Bedouin of Jordan.

- 57 See n. 25 above.
- 58 Hoyland 2014: 280.
- 59 Dueck 2000 and Hornblower and Spawforth 1998: 266–7.
- 60 Millar 1964; Andersen and Hohl 1975.
- 61 Matthews 1989: 71–80; Kelly 2008; Rohrbacher 2002: 14–25.
- 62 Amongst the extensive literature on Procopius see Meier (ed.) 2016; Cameron (Av) 1996; Kaldellis 2004; Greatrex 2014a; Treadgold 2010: 176–226.
- 63 Treadgold 2010: 80–1.
- 64 Treadgold 2010: 294; see Blockley’s biography of Menander in his translation of the text (1–37).
- 65 For Malchus’ life see Blockley’s biography in the translation of the text Blockley in the translation, vol. 1: 71–86, and 124–30.
- 66 For Photius see Treadgold 2010: 79–80.
- 67 Treadgold 2010: 257; Bowersock 2013: 135–43; Bowersock 2012: 22–5; Millar 2010b.
- 68 Treadgold 2010: 337. See the introduction by Whitby and Whitby in their translation of the text.
- 69 Rohrbacher 2002: 190.
- 70 See Treadgold 2010: 120–6.
- 71 For the Church of the East and the importance of Christians in the Sasanian Persian empire, see Walker 2012, Payne 2015, and Wood (P) 2012.
- 72 For a discussion see Fisher and Wood *et al.* 2015.
- 73 These men and women were not always as distant from the towns and villages of the Levant as their hagiographies would have us believe, as Roman settlement pushed deep into the steppe in Late Antiquity. See Lenski 2011: 249–54.
- 74 On ‘conversion’ and the troublesome use of the term see Mills and Grafton (eds) 2003 and Hefner (ed.) 1993.
- 75 See Weingarten 2005.
- 76 For Cyril’s biography see Price’s translation (xxxviii–xl).
- 77 See Treadgold 2010: 155–64 and Urbainczyk 2002: 95–103 (Theodoret); Rohrbacher 2002: 117–25, Urbainczyk 1997, and Millar 2005: 309–12 (Sozomen); Rohrbacher 2002: 108–16 and Treadgold 2010: 134–45 (Socrates); Rohrbacher 2002: 93–107 (Rufinus).
- 78 Treadgold 2010: 235–56; Jeffreys 1990; see discussion in the translation of Malalas by Jeffreys *et al.*, xxi–xli.
- 79 Treadgold 2010: 299–308; Allen 1981.
- 80 On John see van Ginkel 1995.
- 81 For a concise explanation of the complex history of Chalcedon and its opponents, see Millar 2013b (also on terminology), Beeley 2012, Gray 2005, and van Rompay 2005. See also Frend 1972, Allen 2000, and Menze 2008.
- 82 See Harvey 1982.
- 83 See the introduction to the translation by Trombley and Watt (xi–lii).
- 84 For the history of the text see the new edition translated by Phenix and Horn (2011); see also Greatrex 2009.
- 85 For details of Theophanes’ biography and the history of the text see the discussion by Mango and Scott in their authoritative translation (xliii–lxiv).
- 86 See Fowden (EK) 1999; Fisher and Wood *et al.* 2015: 350–7.

- 87 Weltecke 2010; van Ginkel 1998; Brock 1979–1980 and 1976. See too Chabot's introduction to his translation of Michael's work; for Theophilus see the new translation by Hoyland (2011).
- 88 See Brock 1979–1980: 10–3 and Brock 1976, as well as the introduction in Witakowski's translation.
- 89 Wood (P) 2013.
- 90 See Dabrowa 2012: 164–7.
- 91 Shayegan 2011: 206.
- 92 Payne 2015: 21–22.
- 93 Walker 2006.
- 94 Brock 2009; Howard-Johnston 2010: 128–37.
- 95 Macdonald *et al.* 2015: 60–1, and fig. 1.26. For these different sources for Sasanian history see Gyselen 2009.
- 96 On the new discoveries see Robin *et al.* 2014; on Tall al-Umayri East see Bevan *et al.* 2015.
- 97 See Macdonald 2009d and 2014.
- 98 Robin 2015a and 2015b.
- 99 Macdonald *et al.* 2015: 75–6 and Fiema *et al.* 2015: 405–9.
- 100 Fisher and Wood *et al.* 2015: 347–50; Fiema *et al.* 2015: 410–15.
- 101 Fiema *et al.* 2015: 417–21.
- 102 Fisher and Wood *et al.* 2015: 329–47.
- 103 Humbach and Skjærvø 1983 (Paikuli, in Kurdistan). An English translation of the Parthian and Middle Persian parts of the text of Shapur can be found at www.sasanika.org (UC Irvine), while the Greek text is covered by Maricq 1958.
- 104 A martyrion is a church, usually holding relics, dedicated to a specific martyr or martyrs.
- 105 Hoyland 2014: 280. For a summary see also Munt *et al.* 2015: 480–88.
- 106 Many of the main issues are laid out in Noth 1994, Humphreys 1991, Donner 1998 and Elad 2002. For the application of Islamic sources to pre-Islamic Arabian history specifically see Munt *et al.* 2015. Cf. Daryaei 2013: xxi–xxii for the use of Islamic-era material for Sasanian history, discussing similar problems.
- 107 See al-Azmeh 2014a, who examines the debate in some detail. See Fisher 2011a on the use of pre-Islamic oral poetry, and for an excellent and detailed overview of the sources for the seventh century see Howard-Johnston 2010.
- 108 Fowden (G.) 2014: 11.
- 109 al-Azmeh 2014a: 45–54 (for example).
- 110 Ibn Habib, *Kitab al-Muhabbar*, p. 361. See Fisher and Wood 2016.
- 111 For example, Blachère 1952–64, vol. 2, 347; Shahid 1984c.
- 112 Hamza al-Isfahani, *Tarikh*, pp. 117–21. A number of these texts are discussed by Munt *et al.* 2015: 470.
- 113 See the detailed discussion of the problem by Genequand 2006 and 2015.
- 114 See the conclusion to Fisher and Wood 2016 and the discussions of al-Hira's afterlife in Chapters 3, 4, and 5.
- 115 www.esf.org/coordinating-research/research-networking-programmes/humanities-hum/completed-rnp-programmes-in-humanities/the-transformation-of-the-roman-world.html (accessed January 30, 2019). The results were published in fourteen volumes by Brill between 1997 and 2004. See also Wood (I) 2008.
- 116 Gregory of Tours, 2.31–8. See Chapter 5.

- 117 The literature on the importance of Rome to the history of medieval Europe, and the role of Germanic barbarians in the late Roman Empire, is now extensive. Much of this work embraces the so-called ‘longue durée’ of the late antique discipline, seeing continuities between Roman-ruled Europe and that under the authority of Germanic kings such as Clovis. See Sarris 2011; Kulikowski 2012; Halsall 2007; Heather 2010; Cameron (Av) 2012.
- 118 Pohl (ed.) 1997.
- 119 See in the *TRW* series, for example, Pohl and Reimitz (eds) 1998. See more recently Wickham 2005 on the development of the early medieval world and its relationship to the legacy of Rome.
- 120 Ammianus, 31.10.6. Mallobaudes served the Roman emperor Gratian (367–83).
- 121 See Khoury and Kostiner (eds) 1990; Wickham 2005.
- 122 The phrase of Brown 1996.
- 123 As noted by Liebeschuetz 2015.

2 Between Rome and Parthia

Introduction

In the third century BC, a number of kingdoms and states maintained a delicate balance of power across the ancient Mediterranean world. Amongst these, the Ptolemaic dynasty ruled Egypt; the Antigonids, Macedonia; and the Seleucids, a vast region that at its height encompassed much of the Middle East and stretched as far as India. All three of these Hellenistic kingdoms and their ruling families could trace their origins back to the wars that followed the death of Alexander the Great in 323 BC.¹ By the early second century BC, the order created by this network came under sustained pressure, from the Romans in the west, and from the Parthians in the east, and was entirely restructured by the end of the first century BC.

In 202/1, the Roman Republic emerged triumphant from a bloody war against its North African rival, Carthage. The Macedonian king Philip V had sided with Carthage in this conflict, and before long the Romans defeated Philip (197) and then his son, Perseus (168). In the fallout from the defeat of Philip V, the Romans also became embroiled in a conflict with the Seleucid king Antiochus III, who had sent an ill-fated expeditionary force in a vain attempt to assist anti-Roman factions in Greece. With his troops defeated at Thermopylae in 191, Antiochus was beaten a year later by Lucius Cornelius Scipio, the brother of Scipio Africanus, at Magnesia in western Turkey. In the aftermath of this conflict the Romans strengthened their grip over Seleucid affairs, and emerged as one of the main power brokers in the eastern Mediterranean.² In the meantime, while the Romans were battling Carthage and expanding their interests in the Mediterranean, far to the east, the Parni, a people living south of the Caspian Sea, had taken control of the once-Seleucid province of Parthia (hence ‘Parthians’) in the mid-third century. Parthia itself had already fallen from Seleucid control and was under the semi-independence of the opportunistic Greek satrap, Andragoras, who now ceded authority to Arsaces, from whom the ruling dynasty of the Parthians gained the epithet ‘Arsacid’. Arsaces and his successors steadily enlarged their territory at the expense of the Seleucids. In Babylon in 141 the Parthian king Mithridates I was crowned ‘King of Kings’—the old title of the monarchs of the ancient Achaemenid Persian empire destroyed by Alexander. Mithridates reinforced his authority by taking the Seleucid king Demetrius II captive, and by wrenching Persia (Iran) and Mesopotamia from Seleucid control. The Parthian capital was Seleucia-Ctesiphon, near modern Baghdad.³

The Seleucid kingdom was slowly squeezed into a rump state between the Romans, Parthians, and the many minor kings and dynasts who sought to profit from its weakness.

In the early part of the first century BC, Rome found itself at war with the talented king of Pontus, Mithridates VI (88–63), whose ambitious gaze roved as far as Greece, western Anatolia, and the Aegean Sea, all of which Rome regarded as part of its own sphere of influence. As Roman generals battled Mithridates, his son-in-law, the Armenian king Tigranes, otherwise a Parthian client, took advantage of the general turmoil and a succession dispute in Parthia to conquer a swathe of territory that included large parts of Syria and Mesopotamia. Initially content to leave Tigranes alone, the Romans then changed their minds and targeted him after he gave shelter to Mithridates, who was on the run from the Roman general Lucullus (71). Tigranes refused Roman demands to hand over the Pontic king, and in the aftermath of Lucullus' sacking of the Armenian capital Tigranocerta, the short-lived empire of Tigranes collapsed.⁴ The Parthians had watched the shifting fortunes of this struggle carefully, but even though their kings may have eyed parts of Syria for themselves, the state itself was beset by internal weakness. In fact, clearly unwilling to intervene, a succession of Parthian kings refused requests by both Lucullus and Mithridates to join the war.⁵ With victory over both Mithridates and Tigranes, therefore, it was the Roman general Pompey and the Roman senate who ultimately found themselves with an almost unprecedented authority to shape the political landscape of Syria and much of the territory around it.

The area was riven with problems, many of which were related to the almost total collapse of Seleucid authority, the vacuum left by the defeat of Tigranes, and the weakness of Parthia. There were numerous options, including leaving the ineffective Seleucid king Antiochus XIII in power at Antioch, but in the end the Romans opted for direct action: Syria would be made a Roman province, and the Seleucid monarchy abolished. Three decades later, after the victory of Octavian over Antony at Actium in 31 BC, Roman power was extended into Egypt and the Ptolemaic dynasty, in the guise of Cleopatra, became the last of the Hellenistic kingdoms to fall to Rome. In the meantime kings, princes, cities, small states, and tyrants throughout the Middle East came under Roman influence either as part of the new province of Syria, or as dependent clients, 'friends' of the Republic.⁶

Over the course of several centuries, the network of client states initially organised by Pompey was variously dismantled, reorganised, and adjusted by his successors. Whereas there was only one eastern province in the Middle East in 63 BC, by the early third century AD there would be seven.⁷ States that fell under Roman influence in 63, such as Judea, the Nabataean kingdom, Commagene, Emesa, and Palmyra, eventually lost their status as dependents and became part of an expanding network of Roman provinces. These transformations were sometimes triggered by concerns over internal security and suspicions over loyalty; at other times, it is harder to discern what were the Roman motives. But the provincialisation of territory was also a result of conflict with Parthia, which emerged as a potent foe within just ten years of Pompey's triumph over Mithridates. Parthia possessed its own network of clients, including the city of Hatra in Iraq and the kingdoms of Adiabene and Characene (Mesene) (Figure 2.1).

In practical terms, the Roman and Parthian clients had formed an extensive buffer zone between the two empires. But as the dependent clients in this zone steadily became imperial possessions, this buffer narrowed and neutrality became an increasingly unrealistic option for those left 'in between'. Like many others, Arab princes, kings, and nomads fell under Roman and Parthian influence, and were eventually swept up in an ever more polarised political environment.



Figure 2.1 The Middle East at the end of the first century BC. Illustration by the author.

Arab raiders, Arab nomads, and Arab kingdoms: an overview

Roman authors identified many of the numerous peoples scattered throughout the Middle East at the time of Pompey's settlement in 63 as 'Arabs'. These included Itureans, Idumaeans, Nabataeans, the people of Emesa, the people of Edessa, Hatrans, and a miscellany of others scattered across a region between the Sinai and Persia.⁸ It is worth noting that the people of the famous city of Palmyra were never referred to by Graeco-Roman writers as 'Arabs' in any surviving source, and no evidence (as yet) exists to suggest that they self-identified as such.⁹

Arab *scenitae*, Arab raiders

Roman sources for the first century BC often identify Arabs as a threat to good order. 'Arabians, all of whom are robbers', menaced the people around Chalcis, while Pompey's

legate Afranius battled a different group of 'Arabians' in a pacification campaign nearby.¹⁰ Earlier, Tigranes had dislodged 'nomadic Arabians' from their 'haunts' and moved them to new locations in a bid to 'employ them in trade and commerce.'¹¹ The geographer Ptolemy identified some of the people of Trachonitis—the Leja, a district of lava riddled with caves and a notorious bandit warren—as Arabs.¹²

The Arabs mentioned here were distinguished in the literary sources by their lack of inclusion in a settled, civilised society. Indeed, the Arabians beaten by Afranius existed in a Syria devoid of 'legitimate kings',¹³ while those whom Strabo classed as robbers lurked with other degenerates at the top of a mountain and preyed on the people in the plains and valleys nearby. Tigranes had sought to impose 'settled' activities such as commerce on a wandering people, and Arab robbers in the Leja lived in a place where no self-respecting citizen would make their home. This 'othering' of Arabs was occasionally achieved in ancient sources by means of a loose correlation between Arab, raider, and sometimes the term used for nomadic Arabs, *scenitae*, 'tent-dwellers', drawing on the entrenched ethnographic prejudice against nomads discussed in Chapter 1. Arabs did not need to be nomads to be raiders, but many of Strabo's *scenitae* were brigands and Diodorus lamented that the 'nomadic' Nabataeans followed 'a life of brigandage' and enjoyed sacking the territory around them.¹⁴ A similar view is provided in the *Astronomical Diaries*, which recorded continuous Arab raids in Parthian Mesopotamia and Babylonia between 130 and 90 BC. These incursions damaged the walls of Babylon, killing a senior military official and necessitating the payment of protection money. Here Arab plundering is described in vague terms, providing images of waves of Arabs appearing without warning and causing hysteria and mass panic.¹⁵

Such was the popularity of the 'Arab raider' as a figure in ancient literature that long after the time of Diodorus and Strabo, 'savage' Arabs were given a new lease by Christian writers who viewed their perceived nomadic depredations as the perfect foil to civilised, settled, Christian behaviour (Chapters 3 and 4). Later on, raiding would emerge as an extension of warfare between Rome and Persia, but throughout antiquity it could also be caused by a whole range of mundane reasons, such as drought; sensationalist claims, of course, made better copy.¹⁶ Yet raiding was not a uniquely 'Arab' trait, nor was it necessarily one confined to nomads.¹⁷ As the Safaitic graffiti show (below), the lurid nature of many ancient descriptions of raiding obscures the complexity of the relationship between nomads and their neighbouring communities.¹⁸

Arab townspeople from Emesa to Characene

While Arabs could often be wandering *scenitae*, Roman sources associated some Arabs with kingdoms and cities. These included Sampsigeramus, 'from the tribe of the Emeseni', who ruled the region around Emesa (Homs) and Arethusa.¹⁹ The Emesene kings are first mentioned in the Seleucid period, and it is thought that the Emeseni settled in southern Syria after a period of time as nomads in the first century BC. At first the king and his people became the prominent faction in the Greek city of Arethusa, before (presumably) founding the city of Emesa. In the dying years of Seleucid rule, they were important enough for Sampsigeramus to become involved in a Seleucid succession dispute in 69 BC. Five years later, Sampsigeramus and the Emesenes became Roman clients as part of Pompey's settlement, and, much later, at least one of the Emesene kings gained Roman citizenship. The relationship did not always run smoothly, however: Sampsigeramus' son, Iamblichus, was executed by Antony in 31.²⁰ Like the Nabataeans to the south, Emesa became wealthy from its position on regional trade routes and flourished in the early imperial period; the territory of the kingdom stretched

perhaps from Apamea in the north to Heliopolis (Baalbek) and Chalcis to the south, and the eastern boundary of the kingdom of Emesa appears to have stretched as far as the district controlled by Palmyra (Figure 2.2).²¹

Another Sampsigeramus is recorded as ‘great king’ on an inscription dated to AD 19 and discovered at the Temple of Bel at Palmyra (destroyed by ISIS in 2015), alongside Germanicus, the adopted son of the emperor Tiberius.²² At some point between AD 72 and 78, Emesa lost its independence.²³ Its religious cult—the worship of Elah Gabal—would achieve some notoriety during the Severan period under the emperor Elagabalus.²⁴

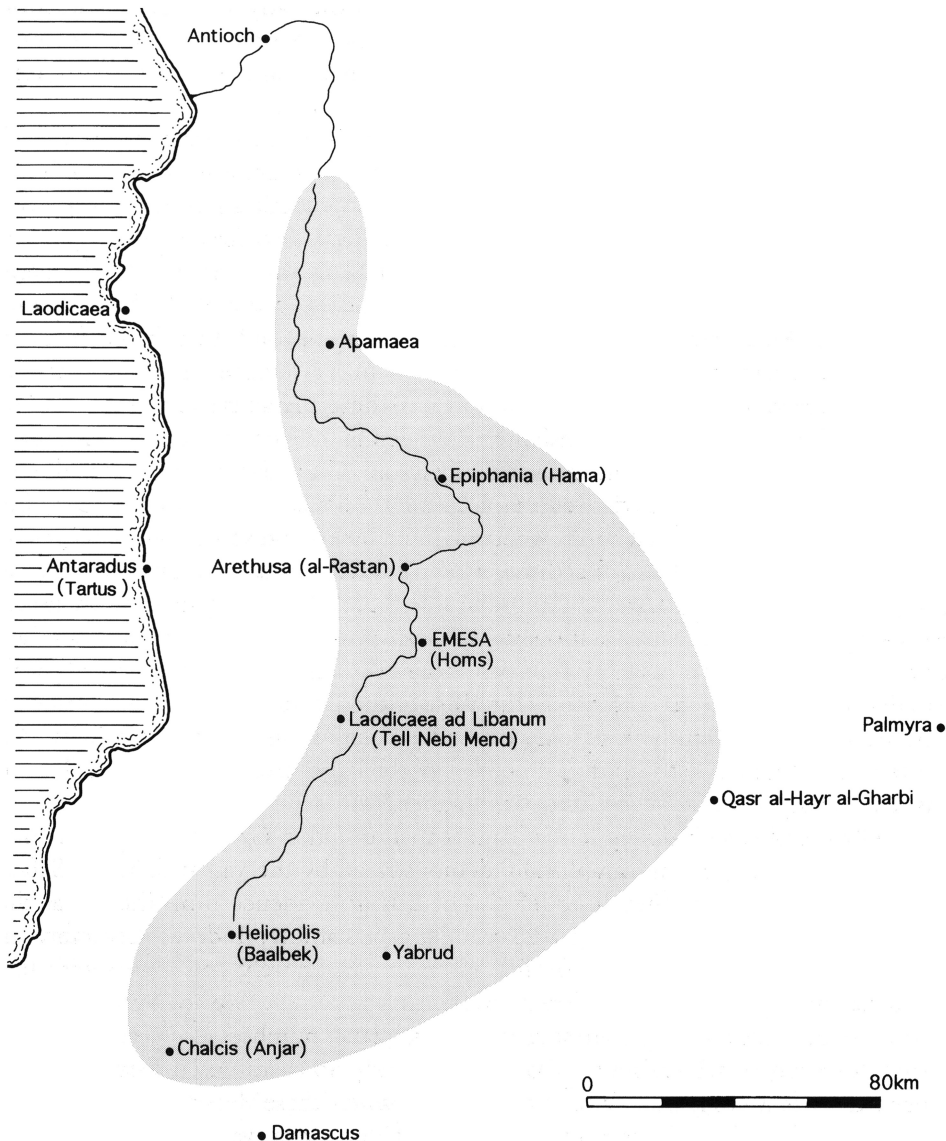


Figure 2.2 The area around the kingdom of Emesa, from Ball 2016: 31. © Warwick Ball.

The Nabataeans, like the Emeseni, also seem to have had nomadic roots prior to settling at the city of Petra. Josephus, Strabo, and Diodorus Siculus all identify the Nabataeans as ‘Arabs’, and much of our information about the history of the Nabataean kingdom comes from these authors.²⁵ One of the most detailed accounts is that of Diodorus Siculus, who wrote in the first century BC. His key informant was Hieronymus of Cardia, a member of the court of the maverick Macedonian general Antigonus the One-Eyed, who had served under Alexander the Great and was swept up in the bloody wars that followed his death. Diodorus’ account is steeped in stereotypical ideas of the ‘noble savage’ that detail an idealised nomadic existence. He reported that the Nabataeans lived in ‘the open air’, and were unfamiliar with the cultivation of crops, wine-making, or house-building. Bizarrely, the practice of ‘civilised’ pursuits like viticulture was punishable by death!²⁶ The reason for this, Diodorus explained, was the fierce independent streak that the Nabataeans possessed: ‘they believe that those who possess these things are, in order to retain the use of them, easily compelled by the powerful to do their bidding’.²⁷ By Strabo’s time, ideas about the Nabataeans had changed, giving the impression of a kingdom firmly centred around a single spot, Petra. Recent work at the site suggests that settlement there did indeed begin in the fourth or third centuries BC.²⁸

The Nabataeans became wealthy due to their position on the trade routes that connected the markets of the Mediterranean to South Arabia.²⁹ Diodorus noted:

While there are many Arabian tribes who use the desert as pasture, the Nabataeans far surpass the others in wealth although they are not much more than ten thousand in number; for not a few of them are accustomed to bring down to the sea frankincense and myrrh and the most valuable kinds of spices, which they procure from those who convey them from what is called *Arabia Eudaemon* [*Arabia Felix*].³⁰

Petra was a significant station on the route which eventually led to Gaza, and, later, the Nabataeans took to refining raw materials such as cinnamon in the kingdom itself.³¹ This wealth, along with that brought by asphalt-mining, fuelled the development of Petra which had, by Strabo’s time, become the ‘metropolis of the Nabataeans’. The city was at the centre of a multicultural kingdom that incorporated a number of the polytheistic deities of the Mediterranean and the Levant, including the goddess Isis, the Nabataean god Dushara, and al-Uzzai, with the latter being one of the proliferation of deities worshipped in polytheist Arabia.³² North of Petra, Nabataean territory spread to the fertile lands that bordered the Greek cities of the Decapolis in the north of modern Jordan. To the west, the kingdom encompassed much of the Sinai, and to its north and northwest, the settlements of Mampsis, Elusa, Nessana, and Avdat in the Negev. The port city of Ayla (Aqaba) in the south was a key point in the trade routes linking Nabataea to South Arabia. Nabataean authority also spread to include the city of Hegra (Madain Salih) in the Hijaz desert, the oasis outpost of Dumah (Jawf) at the southeastern end of the Wadi Sirhan, and the port of Leuke Kome on the eastern coast of the Red Sea, where taxes were levied on goods coming into the kingdom (Figure 2.3).³³

Nabataean prosperity tempted outsiders, but Petra, characterised by a ‘combination of inaccessibility and defensibility’, presented a difficult target.³⁴ Both Antigonus the One-Eyed and his son, Demetrius ‘The Besieger’, campaigned against the Nabataeans without much success.³⁵ The expedition of Demetrius was abandoned when its commander magically fell under the irresistible spell of a passionate speech, in which the Nabataean envoys offered a heavily romanticised image of a proud and free people. Diodorus asks the reader to believe that in the aftermath of this whimsical event, Demetrius was left with no other solution than to agree that any attempt to subjugate such an independent people was futile³⁶ (Figure 2.4).



Figure 2.3 The Nabataean kingdom. Illustration by Aaron Styba.

Later, the Nabataean kings took advantage of the waning power of the Seleucids to extend their reach as far north as Damascus. Under Pompey's settlement, a period of intermittent sparring between Rome and the Nabataeans eventually gave way to a period of friendship which later paid a dividend of questionable value to the Roman Prefect of Egypt, Aelius Gallus, who took with him a substantial Nabataean levy on his expedition to South Arabia.³⁷ The Nabataean kingdom finally became part of the Roman empire as the province of Arabia in AD 106.



Figure 2.4 The *siq*, the main entrance to Petra, viewed from above and visible as a vertical cleft in the rock in the centre foreground. The landscape illustrates the difficulty of attacking the site. Photograph by the author.

The Nabataeans have come under a great deal of scrutiny in an ultimately fruitless attempt to understand whether or not they possessed any identifiable ‘Arab’ characteristics. The question has been debated for many years, in part because of the difficulty of deciding what those ‘characteristics’ might be (Chapter 1). One of the major challenges facing those exploring this question is that descriptions of Nabataean society and culture are, in the majority, provided by writers such as Diodorus, Josephus, and Strabo. Even though Strabo had access to an eyewitness report of life in Petra from his friend Athenodorus, little is known about how the Nabataeans—who never used the label ‘Arab’ on any of their many inscriptions—viewed themselves.³⁸

While the kingdom of Nabataea was more or less immediately affected by the arrival of Roman power, other districts settled by ‘Arabs’, such as the city of Edessa, initially fell well outside the zone of imperial authority. Edessa, whose religious beliefs were initially polytheist, in common with Palmyra, Nabataea, and Hatra, is perhaps best known to history for the legends woven around its adoption of Christianity, and the correspondence between Abgar ‘the Black’ and Jesus. The city was located in a region called ‘Arabia’ by Pliny the Elder, who located other *Arabes* at Singara (Jabal Sinjar, Iraq) to the southeast, and the Edessan kings were sometimes called ‘Arabs’ by ancient writers.³⁹ The city, also known as Antioch Callirhoe, was founded by Seleucus I—the Macedonian general, Companion of Alexander, and founder of the Seleucid dynasty—in 303/2 BC. The city was established on an existing settlement possessing access to a reliable water supply, was favourably located on the trade routes that brought silk into the Mediterranean world, and enjoyed control over a substantial area; it also lay close to one of the most important crossings over the Euphrates (Figure 2.5). Later, the Seleucids lost control of Edessa and the city passed under the authority of the so-called ‘Abgarid’ dynasty in about 132 BC (Figure 2.6).⁴⁰ Under Parthian influence, it became the principal city of the kingdom of Osroëne, and both were part of the scattering of client

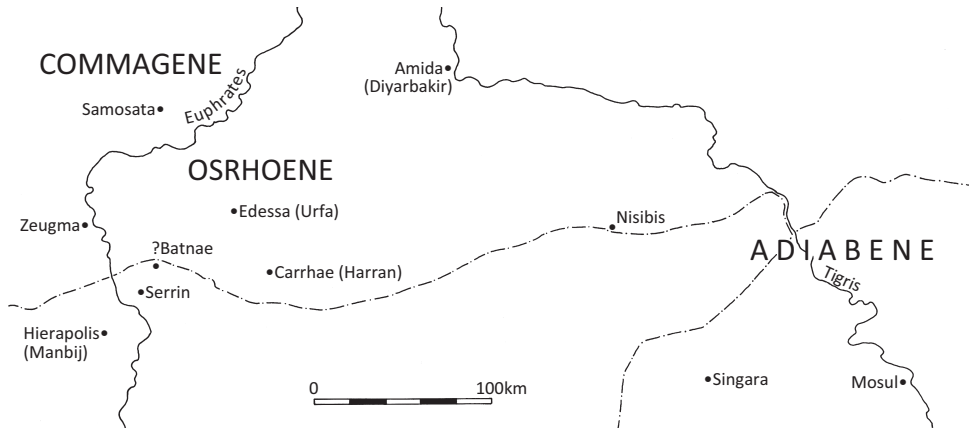


Figure 2.5 The area around Edessa, from Ball 2016: 94. © Warwick Ball.

states in the ‘Parthian Near West’ that also included Adiabene, Hatra, and Characene.⁴¹ Very little is known about the early years of Edessan history, and in fact an Armenian tradition claims that the royal dynasty had Armenian roots, not Arab (or Parthian) ones⁴².

Several Edessan inscriptions from Sumatar Harabesi, southeast of Edessa, and written in Old Syriac, a dialect of Aramaic, refer to a governor of *rb* (‘Arab’) under the authority of the king. Some of these governors are known by name from Syriac inscriptions, such as the Tiridates installed by the Parthian king Vologases IV in the context of his later rivalry with Marcus Aurelius.⁴³

The term ‘Arab’ apparently referred to a region, rather than a name for a group of people, but its extent remains unclear; some have suggested that it extended as far as the Tigris river.⁴⁴ Edessa would become part of the Roman empire after AD 211.

Edessa found itself in a borderlands region that rather quickly became a zone of competition between Rome and Parthia. It was not alone, as this region also included Armenia, the kingdom of Commagene and its capital at Samosata, the kingdom of Adiabene, and the cities of Nisibis, southeast of Edessa, and Hatra, which lay between the Euphrates and Tigris rivers in the district known as the Jazira, ‘the island’. Roman writers identified an ‘Arab’ population at Hatra,⁴⁵ but the history of the city is not well understood due to problems with the literary evidence; much of what has been gleaned comes from the impressive inscriptions (in all, over 500 texts in a local dialect of Aramaic) and the numerous archaeological works carried out at the site.⁴⁶ Strabo, who discusses a route between the Euphrates and Tigris rivers, makes no mention of Hatra, but it is thought that the site began as a settlement around a religious sanctuary visited by nomads, perhaps sometime in the first century AD. Indeed, the very name ‘Hatra’ is derived from the Aramaic *hadr*, or ‘enclosure’, an etymology instantly recognisable in plans and photographs of the city (Figure 2.7). The nearby Wadi Tharthar provided a seasonal source of water, and there were several water sources and wells inside Hatra itself.

Studies have shown that the major phase of building at Hatra only took place *after* a failed siege by Trajan in AD 116.⁴⁷ Inscriptions reveal that Lord Nasru, one of the most important rulers of Hatra, was responsible for constructing the eastern gate and perhaps also the northern gate, by c. AD 138.⁴⁸ Later, after Septimius Severus also failed in front of the ten-metre

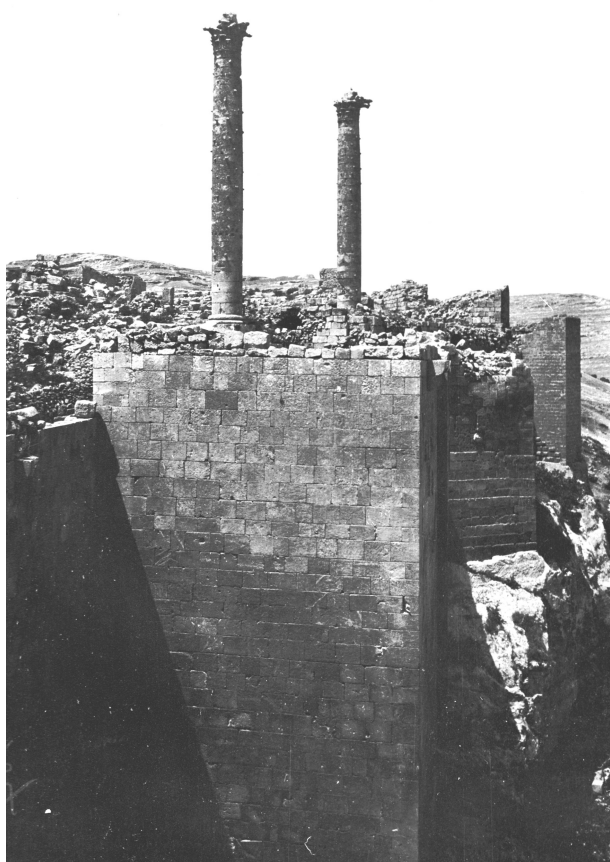


Figure 2.6 The ‘Throne of Nimrud’: two columns on Edessa’s citadel. On one can be found a Syriac inscription recording Manu, likely the father of Abgar X, the final king of Edessa. Image T_201, © Gertrude Bell Archive, Newcastle University.

high city walls, a series of impressive bastions were built that may once have stood as many as 15 metres high; it was in one of these that a near intact *ballista*, a siege catapult, was discovered. It is now in the Baghdad Museum.⁴⁹

In common with other locations discussed here, Hatra was favourably placed to benefit financially from the trade routes that crisscrossed the Middle East, although unlike nearby Palmyra, the city was a way station rather than a central node. The *Peutinger Table*, a medieval copy of a late antique Roman map that shows various itineraries throughout the ancient world, indicates that Hatra linked the regions of Singara and Nisibis with the Parthian capital at Seleucia-Ctesiphon; from there, routes led to Characene and the Gulf. Recently, an analysis of CORONA satellite images dating from the 1960s and 1970s has identified the echoes of a number of long-distance routes directly connecting Hatra to its neighbours, along with a variety of shorter-distance roads to the villages nearby.⁵⁰ As at Palmyra, there are numerous images of camels at Hatra, including a relief of the goddess Allat riding a dromedary,

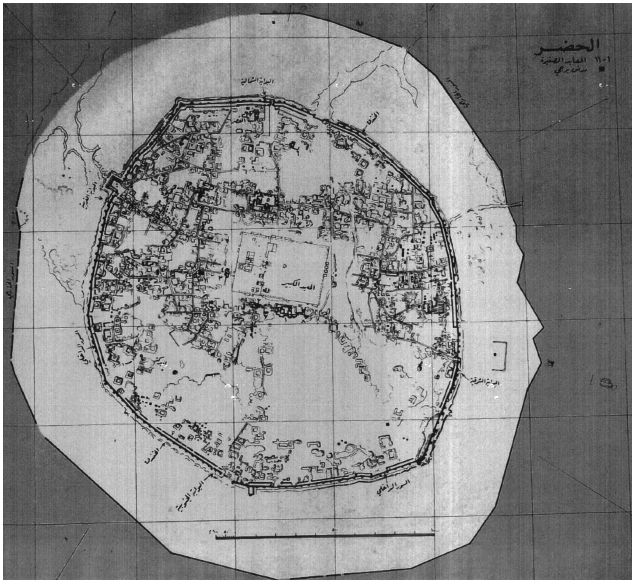


Figure 2.7 City plan of Hatra, showing the central sacred enclosure, areas of occupation, and the walls surrounding the city, from Safar and Mustafa 1974.

although it is unclear whether any of the images refer to the use of camels in long-distance or local trade.⁵¹ (Figures 2.8 and 2.9)

Aramaic inscriptions from Hatra refer to kings of *rb*, a place (once again, ‘Arab’), as well as people who lived in it, *rb*y, ‘Arabs’. Both ‘Arabs’ and ‘Hatrans’ appear on two inscriptions as distinct elements of the population, but whether or not the ‘Arabs’ at Hatra were Arab *scenitae* living outside the city, inhabitants of the district known as ‘Arab’ (whether the same as or different to that mentioned at Edessa) or something else entirely, is not at all clear.⁵²

Hatra has been described as a ‘pre-Islamic Mecca’, a reference to the many shrines and temples, serving both the inhabitants of *rb*, as well as the *rb*y, clustered in this otherwise barren and forbidding location.⁵³ At the city’s centre lies a massive enclosure. Access to this vast area, much of which is empty space, was controlled by three large eastern gates. Over two-thirds of the way across, one encounters the Temple of Maren (the sun god, also known as Shamash)⁵⁴ who appears on the city’s coins and who was symbolised by the eagle that adorns numerous buildings at Hatra (Figure 2.10).

This building is also known as the ‘Hellenistic Temple’, due to its use of familiar design elements found across the eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East. To the right of the Temple of Maren lies the Temple of Allat, a goddess familiar in the Middle East and sometimes equated with al-Uzzai or Venus by Roman writers (Chapter 3). Behind, a north-south wall subdivided the enclosure, marking off the most sacred area of the city. In this latter area lie most of Hatra’s impressive monuments: the so-called Temple of the Triad, honouring Maren, Barmaren (the son of Maren), and Marten (Our Lady); a temple dedicated to Shahiru; the Square Temple, which was dedicated to Shamash, and the vast *twans* (Figure 2.11), distinctly Parthian archaeological features recognisable by a series of domed arches (Figures 2.12 and 2.13).



Figure 2.8 Relief of a camel and her young in the Temple of Allat, Hatra. Photograph by Suzanne E. Bott.

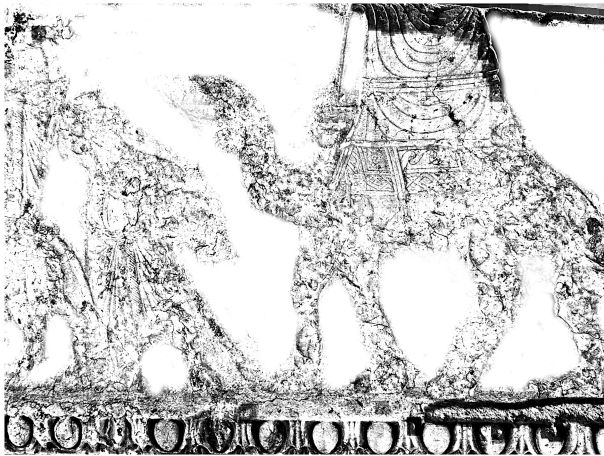


Figure 2.9 Illustration of a peristyle beam relief from the Temple of Bel at Palmyra. The relief, showing a camel taking part in a religious procession, is presumed destroyed when ISIS blew up the central part of the temple in 2015. Illustration by the author.

There were also a number of other temples outside the enclosure but within the city (fourteen at the most recent count), mostly within the confines of Hatra's original wall before it was enlarged after Trajan's departure. These included many small temples whose relevant deities are not always clear. Some, however, have been identified, and include Nabu, Nanaia, Nergal (closely linked with Heracles), and Atargatis. As with several of those in the central enclosure itself, some of the temples appear to have been intended for the worship of more than one deity. The gods mentioned in the Hatran inscriptions are drawn from a vast



Figure 2.10 Early-mid second c. AD coin of Hatra, badly worn, showing the head of Shamash on the obverse; an eagle with its wings spread, surmounted by a laurel wreath, on the reverse. Image courtesy of Classical Numismatic Group, Inc.: www.cngcoins.com.



Figure 2.11 Detail of relief showing a gorgon's head, along with two Middle Aramaic inscriptions (H 106A and H 106B) from Iwan #4 at Hatra. The inscription on the right mentions two of the architects involved in building the temple of Shamash. Photograph by Mary Proffit, COL (Ret.), US Army.

area, from Mesopotamia to Greece, and from neighbouring Syria and Arabia.⁵⁵ Persian religious influences are apparent in the likely presence of a fire temple, along with the cult of Nergal, while the numerous statues found at Hatra share many features with Parthian artistic conventions and styles.⁵⁶ Hatra's rulers took a personal interest in religious worship, with Lord Nasru appearing on one inscription as 'great priest of the god Shamash'.⁵⁷ Eventually, and after gamely resisting several Roman sieges, the city was attacked and burned by the Sasanian king Ardashir I or his son Shapur in around AD 240, and its population deported to Persia (Chapter 3).

While so much remains to be discovered about Hatra, it is also a place of immense significance in terms of the catastrophe that has befallen large parts of the Middle East since the



Figure 2.12 Low altitude view of the central sacred enclosure at Hatra, looking to the west. Photograph by Suzanne E. Bott.

American invasion of Iraq in 2003, which led to the rise of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and the latter's metamorphosis into ISIS. Along with a number of other locations in Iraq and Syria, the restored and conserved temples and other buildings in the centre of Hatra were subjected to severe vandalism by ISIS terrorists.⁵⁸ At the Mosul Museum, the statues from Hatra were smashed with sledgehammers, including an irreplaceable statue of king Sanatruq II.⁵⁹

The plurality of religious belief at Hatra was rather common for antiquity (see also the discussion that opens Chapter 3). One of the most famous finds at Hatra, sadly now missing and thought to be stolen,⁶⁰ shows Nergal corralling a creature that looks suspiciously like Cerberus, the multi-headed dog of Greek mythology, who guarded Hades; the artful blend of east and west inherent in the image recalls the famous relief of Antiochus I of Commagene shaking hands with Heracles near Nemrut Dag, in Turkey. Yet such pluralism stood as an affront to a group whose Salafist ideology made it hostile to the past, and intolerant of divergent religious viewpoints (Figure 2.14).

As Philip Wood has explained, Hatra (together with Nineveh, which was also sacked):

are sites of idolatry, relics of a pre-Islamic past that may turn people away from the worship of God. Statues are presumed to be the idols of pagan gods. They are destroyed lest they become objects of false worship, in a re-enactment of Muhammad's own destruction of the idols kept in the Kaaba at Mecca. The same mentality of cultural cleansing underpinned the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas by the Taliban in 1999 and the destruction of pre-Islamic sites in Saudi Arabia. From such a perspective, protests by those in the West, or by moderate voices in the Middle East, are simply signs of their own contemporary *jahaliya*, the age of ignorance before Islam.⁶¹

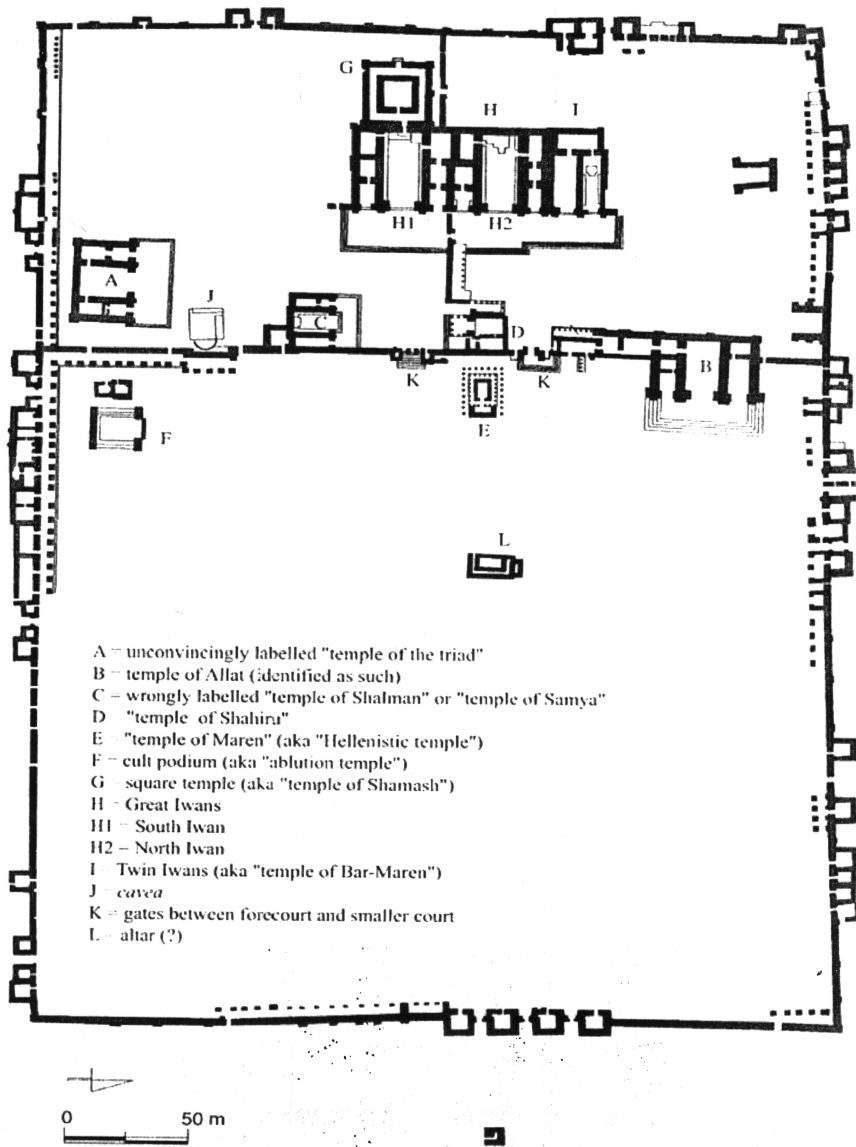


Figure 2.13 Plan of the sacred enclosure at Hatra. Reproduced by kind permission of Dr. T. Kaizer, from Kaizer 2000: 252.

This is the same logic that ISIS has deployed in its campaigns against Christians, Yazidis, Shia Muslims, and others from Syria and Iraq, and which hastened their terrible crimes against humanity along with further acts of vandalism at Palmyra and many other locations across the region. Such religious communities, together with the archaeological treasures that had been largely accepted by centuries of caliphal government after the seventh century AD, were viewed by ISIS as having no appreciable value.⁶²



Figure 2.14 A war crime: vandalism of the relief shown in Figure 2.10, by members of ISIS; still taken from ISIS propaganda video. Public domain.

Finally amongst this group of ‘Arab’ principalities, there was the kingdom of Characene. Its principal city was originally known as Alexandria-on-the-Tigris, as a foundation of Alexander the Great in 324 BC. Later, after a devastating flood, Antiochus IV refounded the city as Antioch in c. 166 BC. For the local satrap, Antiochus chose one Hyspaosines, apparently of Indo-Bactrian origin. This turned out to be an interesting choice: when Seleucid rule dramatically weakened after 139 with Demetrius II taken prisoner by the Parthians, Hyspaosines set off to campaign in Babylonia between 138 and 132, and then declared himself king, an event that the *Astronomical Diaries* dates to June 24, 127 BC. Later, Hyspaosines refounded Antioch as Spasinou Charax, ‘the fortress of Spasosines’. The kingdom seems to have profited from the decline of Gerrha—an important and nearby trading city on the eastern side of the Arabian Peninsula—and in its earlier guise as Antioch, may even have been intended to hasten Gerrha’s economic demise in the first place.⁶³ Given this, it is somewhat ironic that Hyspaosines’ heyday was short; his last coin issue dates to c. 121, and after retaking Babylonia the Parthian king Mithridates II underscored his dominance by over-striking Characenian coins.⁶⁴ (Figure 2.15)



Figure 2.15 Tetradrachm of Hyspaosines, minted at Spasinou Charax, 123/2 BC. Image courtesy of Classical Numismatic Group, Inc.: www.cngcoins.com.

Of the population of Characene little is known, but Pliny noted that ‘Spaosines’ ruled over ‘the neighbouring Arabs’.⁶⁵ Some of these ‘neighbouring Arabs’ or others nearby may have been the raiders mentioned by the *Astronomical Diaries*, or the name may have been used simply to report the common belief that the people living on the Arabian shore of the Gulf were Arabs.⁶⁶ Like Edessa and Hatra, Characene was, for most of its existence, a Parthian vassal. It was in a position of prime economic importance, providing the only harbour facilities capable of linking the interior with the maritime routes connecting the Gulf, South Arabia, Egypt, and markets in India, and was well-sited to tap into the luxury pearl market in the Gulf.⁶⁷ Characene’s privileged position in this zone of economic and political influence is reflected in the second century AD presence of a Palmyrene, Yarhai, stationed at Tylos (Bahrain) as satrap on behalf of ‘Meredat [Mithridates] king of Spasinou Charax’.⁶⁸ Further indications of links between Palmyra, Bahrain, and Characene include a Greek inscription of Hyspaosines and queen Thalassia, from Bahrain, and the numerous inscriptions from Palmyra that mention Spasinou Charax.

Characene ‘went over’ to the Romans for a brief period in response to the expedition of Trajan (AD 114–17), before emerging from the conflict under tightened Parthian control. The Meredat mentioned above was one of the Parthian governors appointed to Spasinou Charax, as the dust settled after Trajan’s withdrawal from the east, and he clung on until driven out by the Parthian king Vologases IV in 151.⁶⁹ Remarkably, for much of the kingdom’s existence, the leaders at Spasinou Charax managed what Daniel Potts has called ‘an uncanny degree of independence’, achieved, perhaps, because of Characene’s undeniable economic importance.⁷⁰ In a promising coda to the catastrophe endured by Iraq since 2003, in 2016 archaeological work began at Spasinou Charax, finally identified as Jabal Khayaber, near Basra. Amazingly, the city was found exactly where Pliny the Elder located it in his *Natural History*. To date, work has identified residential areas and a large Arsacid palace⁷¹ (Figure 2.16).

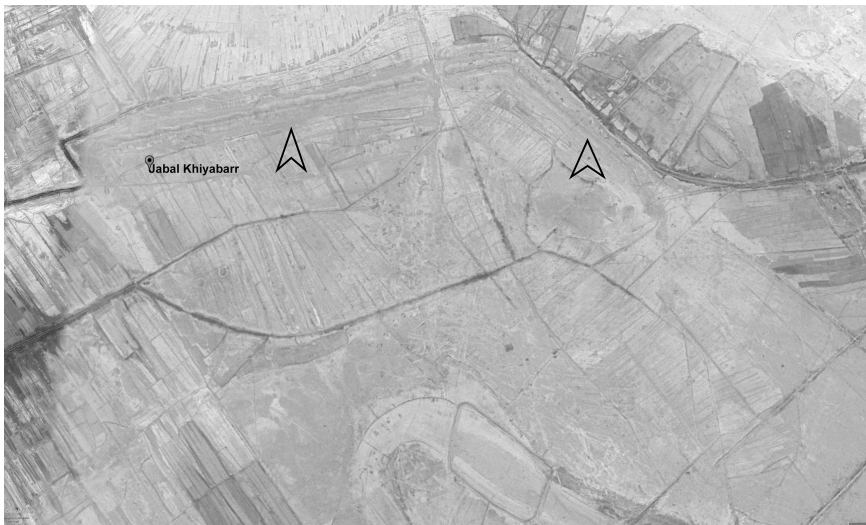


Figure 2.16 Google Earth Pro image of the Jabal Khayaber site identified as Spasinou Charax. The earth/brick rampart can be seen running across the top of the image (left-hand arrow), punctuated by a gateway through which a track running north-south can be seen. Part of the eastern rampart is preserved (right-hand arrow), while the dry river bend (the inverted ‘U’ at the bottom of the image) is the ancient river Eulaeus. Imagery © 2019 DigitalGlobe, © 2018 Google, © 2019 CNES/Airbus.

Arabs and the end of the Roman Republic

Roman governors of Syria skirmished with Nabataean forces on numerous occasions between 62 and 55 BC, and these efforts appear to have convinced the Nabataean kings to accept Roman friendship.⁷² The sporadic fighting south of the province was a minor event, however, compared to the drama unfolding in the mid-50s in Mesopotamia as Rome and Parthia engaged in their first major conflict.

Lucullus and Pompey had both confirmed a wary Roman friendship with Parthia that fixed the Euphrates as the border between the two states.⁷³ In 54/3 BC the status quo was shattered by the aggressive campaign of Crassus, the famous Roman general and plutocrat. Crassus had obtained the proconsular governorship of Syria under the extralegal manoeuvrings of the First Triumvirate (58–53 BC), a power sharing arrangement with Pompey and Julius Caesar that would eventually lead to a catastrophic civil war. Crassus, keen to win a success that would stand up to Caesar's achievements in Gaul, as well as to Pompey's exploits against Mithridates, the Seleucids, and indeed across the Levant, saw a suitable opportunity with an assault on Parthia. In a brazen act of hostility, Crassus crossed the Euphrates with an army, aiming for Seleucia-Ctesiphon. He had marched only part of the way when he was defeated by the Parthian general Surena at Carrhae, southeast of Edessa, and subsequently died in mysterious circumstances. One legend asserts that the hapless general had molten gold poured down his throat, a particularly nasty end that mocked his status as one of the richest men in antiquity.⁷⁴

According to Plutarch, during the early part of the campaign, Crassus encountered a certain 'Arab chieftain' named Ariamnes who, according to Roman accounts, would lure Crassus to his death. Later accounts replace Ariamnes with a Syrian named Mazarus or Abgar (II), the king of Edessa, and it is very likely that Plutarch's Ariamnes and the Abgar found in the later text of Cassius Dio are the same individual.⁷⁵ In Plutarch's text, Ariamnes is described as 'crafty and treacherous', and the soldiers in Crassus' retinue who had earlier campaigned in Syria, with Pompey, cynically reported that he had profited handsomely from his 'friendship' with Rome. On this occasion, Ariamnes wanted to win the confidence of Crassus and entice him to a location where the Parthian army could surround and destroy his force.⁷⁶ To this end, Plutarch reports, Ariamnes drew Crassus into a tough march which left his soldiers tired and thirsty, while the landscape, empty and flat, devoid of all geographic features, sapped the morale of the Roman troops. Plutarch writes with some flourish that their misery was compounded by the constant reminders from Ariamnes on the march of the 'fountains and streams and shades and baths [and] taverns' of Campania.⁷⁷ Roman sources emphasise that Crassus was betrayed by Arab forces, with Dio adding that troops from Osroëne attacked Crassus in the rear during the pivotal confrontation at Carrhae.⁷⁸ After the battle was over, 'Arabs' drew Crassus into a negotiation that apparently ended with his murder, and then helped to kill many of the surviving Roman troops; a rump force escaped and made their way back to Syria.⁷⁹ Any Edessan 'betrayal' should not have been too much of a surprise, though, as the city was a Parthian ally, and in any case, Crassus' hubris and failures of leadership were more likely to blame for the dire failure of the expedition, which left Syria open for an invasion of Parthian forces. On the other hand, Arabs, whom Roman authors (naturally!) knew to be treacherous and uncivilised by nature, made better scapegoats.⁸⁰

Plutarch's account makes use of the Greek word *phylarchos*, 'phylarch'. This label was used widely by Roman authors as a general term to describe barbarian leaders, and especially

leaders of Arab tribes.⁸¹ Before late antiquity, when Arab phylarchs acquired a set of responsibilities within the Roman provincial hierarchy (see Chapters 3 and 4), the term was used rather loosely and with an imprecision that mirrors the general lack of accuracy in discussions about 'Arabs' and 'Arabias' (Chapter 1). Thus Roman writers saw no contradiction in using the term phylarch to describe either kings of states or unnamed chieftains leading small groups of people. Strabo called Sampsisgeramus and Iamblichus 'phylarchs of the Emeseni', and Cicero also called Iamblichus an 'Arab phylarch'.⁸² Yet the king of an important city like Edessa could also be a phylarch (where the Greek term *basileus*, 'king', is sometimes also used), while Strabo also refers to petty chieftains of tribes in Mesopotamia as phylarchs.⁸³

Cassius Dio's account of the defeat of Crassus also refers to the mercurial Alchaedamnius (or Alchaedamnus), described variously as 'the Arabian' or, in Strabo's words, 'king of the Rhambaeans...nomads this side of the Euphrates River'.⁸⁴ The twisting fortunes of Alchaedamnus illustrate the problems faced by those caught up in the changing political map of the Middle East towards the end of the first century BC. Alchaedamnus first appears in accounts of the campaigns of Lucullus, who made a deal with him during the Roman war against Tigranes.⁸⁵ Then, apparently irritated at the poor treatment he had received from Roman officials, he travelled with his people eastwards to Parthia, and was thus positioned to appear in Dio's account of the defeat of Crassus, fighting on the Parthian side.⁸⁶ After the Roman loss at Carrhae, the Parthians launched an ambitious invasion of Syria, and shortly afterwards Pompey and Caesar went to war with one another. This turmoil presented new opportunities, and so Alchaedamnus moved *back* into Syria, emerging as a mercenary allied with Pompey's associate, Bassus. In the Roman civil war Alchaedamnus fought at Apamea in 45/44 BC against forces of the Caesarian faction, led by Gaius Antistius.⁸⁷ In a dramatic scene which bears witness to the challenges and opportunities that faced those who found themselves in the 'middle ground'⁸⁸, Alchaedamnus offered his services to the highest bidder:

On this occasion he was summoned by both sides, but entered the space between the city and the camps and before making any answer called for bids for his services as an ally; and as Bassus outbid Antistius, he [Alchaedamnus] assisted him, and in the battle proved greatly superior in his archery.⁸⁹

Other Arab leaders were swept up in the civil strife that characterised the dying years of the Republic. In Lucan's *Pharsalia*, Arab troops appear as the stereotyped exotic 'other', while Arabia is juxtaposed alongside the distant and unknowable River Ganges, evoking a strange and mysterious place.⁹⁰ Elsewhere, Arabs fought as mounted bowmen for Brutus and Cassius, the assassins of Caesar, against Antony and Caesar's great-nephew Octavian at Philippi in 42 BC. Not long afterwards Antony gave lavish gifts to Cleopatra, which included 'all that part of Arabia Nabataea which slopes toward the outer sea'.⁹¹ In his effort to avenge Crassus and win military glory, Antony also engaged in an abortive invasion of Parthia, passing through 'Arabia'—a part of Mesopotamia also known as 'Arabia' from the work of the fourth-century BC Athenian Xenophon—and which may perhaps have corresponded with the region known as 'Arab' on the Hatran and Edessan inscriptions discussed earlier.⁹² 'Arabs' appear, too, under Antony's command in the build-up to the battle of Actium in 31. King Maliku (Malichos) I of Nabataea sent forces to support Antony, even though he was simultaneously staving off a punitive expedition that king Herod had launched on Antony's orders.⁹³ After Actium, part of Cleopatra's fleet was rather opportunistically burned by 'the

Arabians about Petra'.⁹⁴ 'Arabians' are included as an exotic element at Actium itself, in book eight of the *Aeneid*. When Apollo, the patron deity of Octavian, 'bends his bow', 'all Egypt, India, all the Arabs...turn in terror'.⁹⁵ These outlandish descriptions were manufactured to fit Octavian's propaganda message that it was he, not Antony, who safeguarded the 'civilised' values of the Roman state. Arabs, Medes, Bactrians, and Cleopatra and Antony themselves were the barbaric 'other'.⁹⁶

Augustus and the Arabian Peninsula

By the time that Octavian prevailed over his enemies and became Rome's first emperor under the title of Augustus in 27 BC, the Romans could claim a reasonably detailed knowledge of the geography of the Arabian Peninsula. As well as the data derived from the various expeditions of Alexander the Great, the works of Hellenistic geographers and explorers were available in various forms to writers of the late Republican and early imperial periods such as Diodorus and Strabo. Much of this information had been acquired by royal command: the Egyptian ruler Ptolemy II Philadelphus (285/4–47/6 BC), for example, took a deep interest in the Red Sea and had established the famous port of Berenike on its western shore. Ptolemy ordered the explorer Ariston to reconnoitre the region, adding a great deal to the core of knowledge acquired by the expeditions of Alexander. Ariston's account of his exploits became a key source for the second-century text of Agatharchides of Cnidus (c. 200–131), whose own text was then extracted and quoted by both Diodorus and Strabo as well as by the ninth-century AD *Bibliotheca* of Photius.⁹⁷ Strabo could also draw on the *Geographica* of the chief librarian of Alexandria, Eratosthenes of Cyrene (c. 285–194), written in three books after 245. The *Geographica* derived much of its information on Arabia from a variety of sources including Herodotus, the leaders of Alexander's expeditions, and Hieronymus of Cardia.⁹⁸

Aside from the imperial expeditions and surveys, other sorts of interactions had taken place between Arabia and the Hellenistic world that would also inform the accounts of Diodorus and Strabo.⁹⁹ The Romans were aware of the important emporium of Gerrha on the eastern coast of the Peninsula, which had grown wealthy during the Hellenistic period as a transshipment point for goods from India and South Arabia. Polybius recounts that the city was honoured in person by the Seleucid monarch Antiochus III (205 BC), who bestowed upon it 'perpetual peace and freedom' after receiving a suitably generous gift of frankincense and myrrh. The series of silver tetradrachms imitating issues of Antiochus that include a South Arabian letter in the exergue (the space beneath the main design of the coin, on the reverse) may be related to Antiochus' visit to Gerrha.¹⁰⁰ Later, under the rule of Antiochus IV 'Epiphanes' (175–64), an expedition was sent southwards into the Gulf from Antioch (Characene).¹⁰¹ Such interactions, alongside less formal contact through the movement of caravans and maritime expeditions, contributed to a pool of information about the Arabian Peninsula amongst those involved in commercial, diplomatic, and military activities.

It is not always clear to what extent this kind of first-hand information, distinct from the more formal sort offered by imperial expeditions, passed into Graeco-Roman accounts, but it was clearly an important component of 'general knowledge' about the region. Certainly it seems clear that parts of the *Geographica* of Eratosthenes relied on informants, perhaps Alexandrian merchants, who had travelled the spice route between its northern terminus and South Arabia, and Eratosthenes was also able to pass on to Strabo information about the length of the trade route from Gerrha to South Arabia. Information of this sort was

unlikely to have been obtained from the coastal circumnavigations of Alexander's naval commanders.¹⁰² Furthermore, literary sources and archaeological finds from throughout the Peninsula clearly show a long history of intercultural exchange between Arabia and the Mediterranean world, the Levant, and Mesopotamia. The third-century *Alexipharmaca* of Nicander of Colophon reveals that incense from Gerrha was included in recipes for antidotes to poisoning in Greece, and was for sale in Egyptian markets.¹⁰³ There is evidence for the cult of Athena at Ed-Dur in the modern emirate of Umm al-Qaiwain, and Seleucid, Roman, and Characenian coins, together with Roman and Parthian pottery, have been discovered there (one of the Roman coin finds was a stunning *aureus* of the emperor Tiberius). A Belgian team working at Ed-Dur also uncovered a remarkable temple devoted to the sun-god Shamash, the main deity worshipped at Hatra. Excavations at the port of Dibba on the Gulf of Oman underline connections with both India and the Roman world, while the celebrated 'Abiel' coins from Mleiha in the emirate of Sharjah, imitating issues of Alexander, but which replace the Greek *Alexandrou* on the reverse with the Aramaic legend, 'Abiel, daughter of...', offer further evidence of cross-cultural links.¹⁰⁴ Nabataean coins, a Seleucid fortress, and a temple to Apollo are known from Ikaros (Falaika), at the north end of the Gulf. Athenian coin types influenced money minted by the South Arabian kingdoms of Saba and Qataban, while other coins imitating those of Alexander the Great have been found in northeastern and eastern Arabia.¹⁰⁵ Not long before the Romans went to war with Mithridates, an individual from the 'merchant republic' of Main in South Arabia was buried in Ptolemaic Egypt.¹⁰⁶ Individuals from Gerrha are known from the Greek island of Delos, a clearing house and trading centre in the eastern Mediterranean, and Agatharchides reports their presence in Petra and Palestine. Minaean inscriptions have also been found at Delos, as well as in Iraq at the Persian capital of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, while Minaean merchants returned in the company of women from Egypt and Gaza whom they had married.¹⁰⁷ Therefore, given the rather exotic nature of parts of Strabo's account of Gallus' expedition (discussed below, along with other fanciful reports of South Arabia) it is useful to remember that the vitality of these well-established trade routes meant that Graeco-Roman society was hardly isolated from the settlements of the Peninsula, even if a very great deal remained to be discovered by Alexander's admirals, Ptolemaic and Seleucid explorers, and Aelius Gallus (Figure 2.17).

Strabo's discussion of his sources in the *Geography* shows that the basic topography of the Peninsula, the location of the Red Sea ('the Arabian Gulf'), the (Persian) Gulf, and the Indian Ocean ('the great sea') were broadly understood.¹⁰⁸ Less was known about the southern coast of the Peninsula than the Red Sea and the Gulf; Eratosthenes' report on the latter, obtained from Androstenes of Thasos, one of Alexander's companions, included an intriguing tale about the salt-structures of Gerrha.¹⁰⁹ Strabo's digestion of the work of his predecessors also shows that the Romans knew a reasonable amount about the peoples of South Arabia, such as the Minaeans, and the kingdom of Saba, with its capital at the oasis of Marib. A murky understanding of customs and politics is visible in Strabo's account.¹¹⁰ Despite all of this, exotic stereotypes of Arabia and Arabs persisted, not just in Strabo, but also in the text of Diodorus. Fanciful animals inhabited the Peninsula, including the 'cameleopard' and the 'goat-stag'. These hybrids were products of the fierce and life-giving heat of South Arabia, which 'generates breeds of beautiful animals in great number and of varied colour'.¹¹¹ The region possessed its own fragrance that bewitched travellers. Those who smell it, remarked Diodorus, quoting Agatharchides, 'feel that they are enjoying the ambrosia of which the myths relate, being unable, because of the superlative sweetness of the perfume, to find any other name that would be fitting and worthy of it.'¹¹² No wonder then that for Strabo



Figure 2.17 Trade routes in the ancient Middle East. Illustration by Aaron Styba, with amendments by the author.

the Arabian Peninsula remained a place with ‘special characteristics’ that still required expert knowledge to extract its mysteries.

In 26/5 BC, with Egypt under Roman control, Augustus ordered an ambitious military campaign to Arabia. The expedition, carried out with substantial Nabataean and Judean support, would be led by the Prefect of Egypt, Aelius Gallus; according to Strabo, it was intended to ‘explore the tribes and the places’ of Arabia.¹¹³ The Roman appetite for grand foreign missions was yet to be tempered by the loss of Varus and his legions in Germany (AD 9), and it is clear that one of the motives behind the expedition was a longing to emulate and surpass the deeds of Alexander. Another motive was a desire to profit from the trade in valuable goods, which were still being moved overland in significant quantities during the time of Augustus. Several cities in the south would have proven tempting: Qani, for example, ‘the royal warehouse of the Hadramawt’, was one of the most important ports in South Arabia

for the movement of luxury goods.¹¹⁴ From Strabo's account, the Arabian mission appears to have been conceived as part of a two-pronged affair, with an additional exploration planned for the western littoral of the Red Sea as far as Ethiopia. The Roman acquisition of Egypt had led to increased interest in the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean trade routes, and a successful expedition might thus extend Roman control south into the Red Sea and along the western side of the Arabian Peninsula, giving Augustus the opportunity to tighten Rome's grip on the routes that led from points south and east into the Mediterranean. However, the exact relationship between the Ethiopian and Arabian missions is not at all clear.¹¹⁵ Finally, relations with Parthia were strained, and Roman influence in South Arabia might offset any attempt by Parthia to extend its own power along the eastern coast of the Peninsula. According to a comment in the *Periplus Maris Erythraei*, a mid-first century AD handbook for sailors dealing with maritime routes in the Red Sea and onwards to India, by that period parts of eastern Arabia were indeed under Parthian influence. As noted above, first-century Parthian pottery has been found at Ed-Dur, while the fort found there is considered by Potts to belong to the Parthian tradition. A Parthian military installation is also known from Bahrain, and the inscription from Palmyra mentioned above shows that the island was administered for a time from Spasinou Charax. Indeed, coins of Meredat from AD 143/4 have been found at Ed-Dur, with the Greek legend *Basileus Oman*, understood as 'king of the Omani'. Ed-Dur is sometimes identified as ancient 'Omana', a location that the *Periplus* stated was a 'Persian emporium'.¹¹⁶ While these examples mostly suggest a later phase of Parthian influence in Arabia, not contemporary to the Gallus expedition, it is plausible that the spectre of Parthian pressure in the Arabian Peninsula and the Gulf was a legitimate cause for concern in Rome.¹¹⁷

In his famous autobiographical propaganda piece, the *Res Gestae*, Augustus makes grand claims of conquest in Arabia and reports that Gallus and his troops reached the Sabaeen capital, Marib.¹¹⁸ Gallus does seem to have captured Najran and Baraqish (Athrula/Yathil) in 24 BC, and apparently began a siege of Marib, although it is not entirely clear whether Strabo's 'Mariaba' refers to Marib or some other location.¹¹⁹ Lack of water eventually caused the Romans to abandon the siege, and in general the expedition was plagued by all sorts of unexpected problems that hampered its progress.¹²⁰ Scurvy, a shortage of water, poor knowledge of natural features and obstacles, and a badly selected route—the fault of the Nabataean guide Syllaues, according to Strabo—all played a role in pulling Gallus off course. Apparently under Nabataean direction, Gallus had begun his preparations by building a large fleet of warships, even though no campaign against an opposing navy was likely to take place. With this realisation, Gallus was then forced to build a new fleet of transports: Syllaues insisted on Gallus ferrying his army from across the Red Sea to the port of Leuke Kome, after declaring that there was no suitable land route between there and Egypt. This was manifestly not true, as an indignant Strabo pointed out.¹²¹ It is sometimes thought that Syllaues, no doubt divining the purpose of the expedition, had acted on the orders of his superiors to protect Nabataea's privileged position in the trade route network.¹²² As the expedition lurched uncertainly southwards, Roman casualties mounted, mostly from illness and exhaustion; few Romans appear to have actually been killed in combat, although the epitaph of one, a cavalryman, was discovered at Baraqish.¹²³ Eventually, the expedition stalled, and Gallus decided to return to Roman territory—this time with a new guide.¹²⁴ (Figure 2.18)

Strabo's account of the disaster-prone expedition offers memorable vignettes about the people whom the Romans encountered. Like Plutarch (above), Strabo asserts that Arabians could not be trusted.¹²⁵ He also laments their ineptitude on the battlefield, stating improbably that ten thousand Arabs fell in one clash, 'but only two Romans'.¹²⁶ One part of Strabo's narrative is dedicated to matters of hairstyle and personal customs, and he describes a sort



Figure 2.18 The route taken by the expedition of Aelius Gallus. Illustration by the author.

of caste system where the population of the kingdoms of *Arabia Felix* were divided by their occupations, which were passed down from father to son.¹²⁷ Strabo also reported the bizarre courting practices of the barbarians, a topic of fascination in many classical ethnographies ('a daughter of one of the kings who was admired for her beauty had fifteen brothers, who were all in love with her, and therefore visited her unceasingly, one after another').¹²⁸ At the end of this affair, 'with all who had been fortunate enough to survive', Gallus returned to Alexandria.¹²⁹

The fallout from Gallus' expedition has long been a topic of fascination. Was it as much of a disaster as it seems from reading the account of it provided by Strabo? Embarrassed for his patron, Gallus, Strabo pinned the blame for the debacle on Syllaesus, an expedient face-saving exercise which concealed shameful errors in planning and execution.¹³⁰ Other accounts are more flattering, in particular that contained in Pliny the Elder's *Natural History*.

Pliny, who famously died in the eruption of Vesuvius in AD 79, was deeply interested in the trade in luxuries and devoted a portion of the *Natural History* to covering the nature of the spices and the routes by which they were transported.¹³¹ In something of a cover-up, Pliny's account of the Gallus expedition glosses over the lack of results, and places a positive spin on the whole affair. Jan Retsö noted in his assessment that 'most of the heroic military operations described by Pliny probably never occurred'.¹³²

Recent re-evaluations suggest, however, that Strabo was being too pessimistic when he says that the expedition 'did not profit us', and the outcome should—perhaps unexpectedly—be interpreted as something of a success.¹³³ It is clear that Gallus' efforts had a number of important consequences. In a general sense, the expedition stimulated interest in Arabia, perhaps in part because of the various (tall?) stories told by former participants about their epic journey to the south of what was, for many, something of a *terra incognita*.¹³⁴ There were also continued efforts to acquire knowledge for the empire. For example, the king of Mauretania, Juba, wrote a short book on Arabia (*On the Arabian Expedition*) to prepare an unrealised mission of Gaius Caesar, the grandson of Augustus. The book is now lost, but parts of it are known from Pliny.¹³⁵ To some extent, Arabia stuck in the Roman imperial consciousness—and some of that curiosity was reciprocated. Steven Sidebotham suggests that the South Arabian kingdoms now recognised that the Nabataeans and the Ptolemies had been supplanted by the Roman state as the dominant force in parts of the Red Sea.¹³⁶ Embassies from Himyar and Saba were dispatched to Rome, as the *Periplus* implies in its mention of 'Charibael' [Karabil], king of the 'two nations, the Homerite [Himyarite] and... the Sabaeen', who was a 'friend of the emperors, thanks to continuous embassies and gifts'. Self-interest seems to have played a role in creating any such ties with Rome, due to the long-standing economic importance of the trade networks that linked the South Arabian kingdoms to the Mediterranean. Unfortunately, neither the chronology of these supposed visits, nor the identity of the 'emperors', is clear.¹³⁷ At some point after the expedition, ambassadors from India reached Augustus, perhaps as a response to the display of Roman power in Arabia.¹³⁸ The so-called 'class B' coins from Sanaa, apparently minted after the expedition, featured the head of Augustus, showing a clear awareness of Roman power.¹³⁹ There are also several South Arabian inscriptions that appear to mention the Roman expedition, even if they do so allusively. Two Sabaeen inscriptions found near Najran describe a battle with a Nabataean force and their subsequent defeat at the hands of Sabaeen troops. This may allude to the Nabataean auxiliaries who took part in Gallus' expedition.¹⁴⁰ Whatever the case, friendly relations with Nabataea and Saba were soon restored, as a bilingual Sabaic and Nabataean inscription from Marib, dating from 7/6 BC, demonstrates.¹⁴¹ Two other inscriptions mention the Romans—a Sabaic text from the Awam temple at Marib, and a Qatabanic text from Tamna.¹⁴²

From Augustus to Severus

Despite ongoing interest in the Arabian Peninsula, after the campaign of Gallus no further Roman military missions were sent southwards.¹⁴³ According to Pliny, Gaius Caesar risked a glimpse into the deserts of Arabia, but, perhaps wisely, took no further action.¹⁴⁴ One might imagine that the eventual lack of any major efforts had less to do with Gallus and more to do with the later fallout from the Varus affair, ongoing concern with Parthia, or a host of other possible reasons. In his will, Augustus famously admonished his successors to 'be satisfied with their present possessions and under no conditions to wish to increase the empire to any greater dimensions'.¹⁴⁵ While the spirit of this advice was freely ignored by his successors, Arabia appears to have remained 'off the list' for any determined exploration or campaign.

Future missions into the Peninsula would be carried out by Roman allies, such as the armies of the kingdom of Aksum, or by Roman diplomats (Chapters 3 and 4).

In consequence, for much of the first century AD, 'Arabs' and 'Arabias' make only minor appearances in Greek and Latin sources. Paul mentions 'Arabia' in Galatians, perhaps referring to the Sinai, an area known as 'Arabia' by Greek authors such as Herodotus.¹⁴⁶ Much of the Arabian Peninsula receives a detailed treatment in the anonymous *Periplus*.¹⁴⁷ From the *On the Months* of John Lydus, the Emperor Claudius appears to have had contact with a leader named 'Arethas', perhaps the Nabataean king Aretas IV, who died in the same year that Claudius came to the throne.¹⁴⁸ Josephus reports that 'Arab bowmen' fought for imperial forces during the Jewish Revolt (AD 66–70). During this conflict the Romans also depended on levies from Emesa and, in the memorable words of Tacitus, 'a strong force of Arabs imbued with the hatred of the Jews customary between neighbours'.¹⁴⁹

The overall picture from Roman sources in this period is rather patchy, but it receives a valuable supplement from a clutch of Greek inscriptions found throughout the frontier zone in Syria where the towns and villages give way to the marginal agricultural lands of the steppe, and then the desert. A number of texts are known from the eastern side of the Jabal al-Arab in Syria, reflecting cultural and diplomatic exchanges between members of the local communities. One, for example, refers to a '*strategos*' [officer] of the nomads, while another reveals nomads paying their respects to a Roman officer, a *legatus*.¹⁵⁰ The *strategos* was perhaps a man assigned by Roman authorities 'charged with liaison with the nomads',¹⁵¹ and in this the Romans may have been following an established custom: an older attestation of a *strategos* 'of the nomads' from the same area dates to the reign of the Judean king Agrippa II (AD 53–93/4).¹⁵² Interestingly, there is also a significant corpus of Nabataean inscriptions referring to *strategoī*, dating from between 32 BC and AD 95, all from within the geographical region of the Nabataean kingdom. The Nabataean *strategoī* appeared to have combined both military and civilian duties—one text, for example, shows a *strategos* acting in an administrative capacity at Hegra (Madain Salih), collecting a fine. In the Nabataean kingdom the *strategoī* were linked with places of central authority and were very much a part of Nabataean government.¹⁵³ The occurrence of the term in the Greek inscriptions mentioned here might therefore represent a similar type of office, perhaps involved with raising and commanding troops from amongst the inhabitants of the region and maybe including some kind of civilian authority.¹⁵⁴ It is possible that these troops may have formed some of the Arab levies who appear sporadically in accounts of the earlier Roman civil wars and the conflicts of the first century AD.

The Greek inscriptions mentioned here are important, because they provide an image not of division between 'insiders' and 'outsiders' at the edges of settlement, but rather one of collaboration and cooperation intermixed with occasional periods of strife and conflict. This general picture is supported by modern anthropological studies of the relationship between nomads and settlers (Chapter 1), as well as by the so-called 'Safaitic' inscriptions.¹⁵⁵ Dating from the first century BC to the fourth century AD, these thousands of graffiti, written by nomadic pastoralists in a dialect of Ancient North Arabian, are found throughout the deserts of northern Jordan and southern Syria and in the northern part of what is now Saudi Arabia. Isolated examples have even been found at Pompeii.¹⁵⁶ The graffiti are predominantly personal in nature, quite different from the monumental inscriptions of the sort provided by emperors, governors, or community elites. They offer intriguing insights into the daily activities of their authors, and demonstrate the comingling of different communities in the region.¹⁵⁷ Some of the inscriptions, for example, show that people from the towns of Roman Syria served in desert outposts, while others reveal that nomads spent time in the cities and

served in the army.¹⁵⁸ A number of texts have been found mixed up with Latin and Greek military graffiti, and several talk of links to major cities, such as Palmyra.¹⁵⁹ The graffiti also occasionally show an awareness of major events, such as the deaths of leaders and dignitaries, and of the activities of Romans and Persians and of the kingdoms of Nabataea, Palmyra, and Judea.¹⁶⁰ In common with the inscriptions of merchants from Main in Egypt and those from Gerrha on Delos, the Safaitic texts are an (even more visible) reminder of the ‘less formal’ interactions between the Graeco-Roman world and the ‘other’.

The creation of the Province of Arabia

After a tortuous period of semi-independence alternating with periods of direct rule, the kingdom of Judea, along with the various regions that it controlled, permanently became a Roman province between AD 92/3 and 100 with the death of king Agrippa II.¹⁶¹ Other client kingdoms had shared a similar fate, with Emesa (c. 72–8) and the important northern kingdom of Commagene (72) both losing their independence.¹⁶² Tellingly, the royal dynasty of Commagene had (falsely) come under the suspicion of the governor of Syria, Caesennius Paetus, for collusion with the Parthian monarchy. This episode stands as a witness to the increasingly precarious political position of those who found themselves in the contested ground between Rome and Parthia.¹⁶³

In AD 106, the governor of Syria, Cornelius Palma, annexed the Nabataean kingdom. This territory became the Roman province of Arabia, and by the following year, the first governor, Claudius Severus, was in office.¹⁶⁴ Despite challenges from Egypt and Palmyra to its privileged position on the eastern trade routes, Nabataea had flourished in the first century AD. The Roman presence in the Middle East had given a boost to regional security, and the Nabataeans benefitted from the lengthy reigns of Aretas IV (9 BC–AD 41), Malichos II (41–70) and Rabbel II (70–106).¹⁶⁵ The magnificent architecture of Petra and that of the less well-known southern city of Hegra (Madain Salih) stands as an enduring testament to the wealth of the kingdom, and illustrates the percolation of Hellenistic culture into the tastes of the Nabataean elite.¹⁶⁶ (Figures 2.19 and 2.20).



Figure 2.19 Monumental tombs at Hegra (Madain Salih), Saudi Arabia. Photograph by the author.

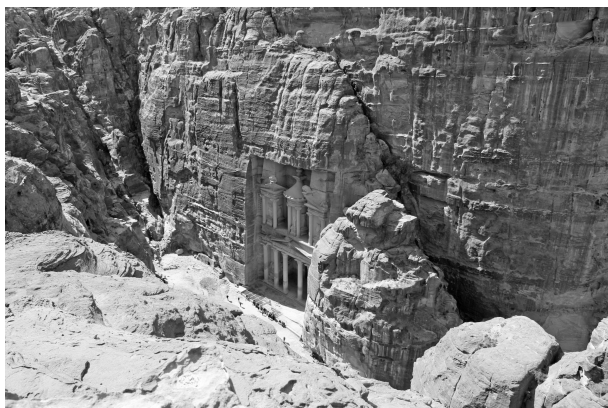


Figure 2.20 The famous ‘Treasury’ at Petra, reflecting the influence of Hellenistic culture at Petra. Photograph by the author.

Under Rabbel II, the northern city of Bosra in Syria (known in Roman sources as Bostra) underwent a period of expansion, and considerable agricultural development took place in parts of the Hauran, the region that includes the Jabal al-Arab and the surrounding districts as far as Bostra itself.¹⁶⁷

The reasons for the annexation, and the ways in which the new province was organised, have been discussed for many years; Trajan’s ‘eastern ambitions’, shortly to be realised with a massive assault on Parthia, may have played a role, as might a desire to increase the Roman presence in the Red Sea.¹⁶⁸ Little is known about the state of affairs in the kingdom at the time of the death of Rabbel II, although there do not seem to be any questions about the king’s loyalty of the sort that triggered the demise of the royal house of Commagene.¹⁶⁹ There does not appear to have been any significant military confrontation between Roman and Nabataean forces, and Roman coins celebrated *Arabia adquisita*—acquired, not captured (Figure 2.21). On the other hand, it has been suggested that isolated pockets of resistance lingered for a while due to resentment over the Roman decision.¹⁷⁰ The capital of the *Provincia Arabia* was established at Bostra. Petra retained a level of economic and political value well into the sixth century, and one Roman governor of Arabia, Sextius Florentinus, was sufficiently enamoured of the city to make it his final resting place.¹⁷¹

The annexation meant, of course, that one of the several districts known as ‘Arabia’ had become formally recognised in the Roman provincial structure. Several cities of the Decapolis also became part of the new province, including Philadelphia (Amman), Adraa, and Gerasa (Jerash, in Jordan).¹⁷² A road, the impressive *Via Nova Traiana*, was built from Bostra to Ayla, and a new dating system was established which reckoned time from the annexation (Figure 2.21).¹⁷³

The Nabataean army was incorporated into the Roman force as auxiliaries; a recently discovered inscription found near Dumah (Jawf) records a person with a Nabataean name serving as a centurion, presumably in a Roman military unit, while another, dated to 135, records a cavalryman who was likely part of a Roman detachment. Despite their new ‘identity’ within the Roman military, it is rather interesting that both of these texts use the terms for ‘centurion’ and ‘cavalryman’ that were in use in Nabataea prior to 106.¹⁷⁴

(a)



(b)



Figure 2.21 Dupondius of Trajan, minted at Rome in AD 113/114. On the obverse, radiate head of Trajan, right; on the reverse, Arabia stands personified, holding a branch (right hand) and cinnamom (left hand); a camel stands alongside. In the exergue, “ARAB ADQ”, celebrating the acquisition of Arabia. Private collection.

The garrison of the province, the *Legio III Cyrenaica*, was based at Bostra, augmented by auxiliaries brought in from elsewhere. Roman troops also found themselves stationed in the Hijaz desert at and around the city of Hegra; a recent find there indicates the presence in the second century of officers from the *Legio III Cyrenaica*.¹⁷⁵ Another mentions a certain ‘Hadrianus’, painter (shield-decorator) of the same legion, which might date to the second or the third century.¹⁷⁶ Graffiti carved by soldiers, also likely from the same period, show the presence of two cavalry units—including one posted from North Africa—at a lonely spot south of Hegra,¹⁷⁷ and an inscription at Dumah records the dedication of a Roman centurion from the *Legio III Cyrenaica*, Flavius Dionysius.¹⁷⁸ A later Latin inscription from the island of Farasan in the Red Sea, dated to c. 140–44, mentions an element of the *Legio II Traiana Fortis*, whose presence there may be connected with the collection of customs duties.¹⁷⁹ Elsewhere in the region, the impressive remains of roads, fortifications, and watchtowers in the *Provincia Arabia* stand as enduring reminders of the attention given by imperial authorities to the defence of the region. And, as a series of late-second century inscriptions found at Ruwafa further indicate, Roman authorities were also engaged in enrolling some of the area’s inhabitants into the Roman army. It is thus clear that at least until the end of the Antonine period, the southern limits of the province of Arabia received sustained attention from imperial authorities.

The Ruwafa inscriptions comprise a series of Greek and Nabataean Aramaic texts, discovered at a temple built at a remote site located in present-day northwest Saudi Arabia (Figures 2.22 and 2.23). Most of the inscriptions have been reconstructed in a display at the National Museum of Saudi Arabia in Riyadh, but another part of the text was recently found half-buried at the site in 2011 after being lost for half a century.¹⁸⁰ The temple was erected by the ‘*Thamoudenon ethnos*’, i.e., members of an Arab tribe called Thamud.¹⁸¹ Thamud is known from a variety of sources, including Agatharchides, who locates the ‘Thamudean Arabs’ on the eastern side of the Red Sea, more or less in the location where the Ruwafa temple now stands¹⁸².



Figure 2.22 The bleak landscape near the temple of Ruwafa. Photograph by the author.



Figure 2.23 The walls of the temple of Ruwafa. Photograph by the author.

The inscriptions mention both Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus, and they can be dated to between 166 and 169 on the basis of the titles that are recorded for the emperors in the text. The most recent detailed examination of these inscriptions by Michael Macdonald reinforces the argument that the ‘*Thamoudenon ethnos*’ was a military unit raised from Thamud for service with the Roman army.¹⁸³ The Romans habitually recruited non-Roman troops from the periphery into auxiliary units or even regular regiments of the Roman army all over the empire, and references to Thamud are found again in the *Notitia Dignitatum*, a record of imperial offices and army dispositions at the turn of the fifth century AD (Chapter 3).

It is remarkable that two successive governors of Arabia appear on the Ruwafa inscriptions, suggesting a fairly sustained commitment to this far-flung corner of the empire.¹⁸⁴ This raises a question: with no formal military expeditions into Arabia after that of Gallus, just how far did Roman authority extend? A rough line can be drawn linking the scattered epigraphic evidence from Hegra and its hinterland, Ruwafa, and Dumah. Such a line might suggest that there was a neatly delineated southern boundary of the province of Arabia, but this is misleading. Instead—and especially because the northern ‘boundary’ of the Arabian Peninsula was never particularly well defined—it has been argued that when the Romans acquired the Nabataean kingdom, they did not have in mind any particular idea of where the southern limit might be (a premise which also appears to be true for the Nabataean kingdom before it).¹⁸⁵ The practicalities of policing and local administrative requirements mean that epigraphic evidence for Roman activity has been discovered in only a small area—close to settlements such as Dumah and Hegra, or at isolated points of religious importance, such as the temple at Ruwafa. Certainly, as the boundaries of the province were periodically redrawn, and attention shifted to the war with the Persians in Mesopotamia and problems in South Arabia, the Romans apparently abandoned any *direct* involvement in the Hijaz; there is no evidence for a Roman presence at Hegra after the early third century.¹⁸⁶ Yet since security arrangements there appear to have passed into the hands of proxies and diplomats, and thus remained part of the Roman realm, in theory, it seems rather possible that when the province was created, the Peninsula itself, if a little unrealistically, may have been claimed for the empire. (Compare, as well, the Persian claim on Oman (Mazun) discussed in Chapter 3.)¹⁸⁷

While the Roman province of Arabia and its environs occasionally look like something of a backwater—Petra was a suitable place to exile troublesome bishops in the sixth century, far enough away from Constantinople to cause much harm—it is a region of great interest for events that are discussed later on in this book.¹⁸⁸ The rural monasteries and churches of the province that sprang up after the fourth century AD would play a key role in the developing power of the Roman Arab leaders, al-Harith and his son al-Mundhir (Chapter 4). Secondly, it was within the territory of the former Nabataean kingdom that current research isolates part of the development of the Arabic script, the vehicle through which the Quran would receive its written expression. Even though the known pre-Islamic examples of inscriptions in the Arabic language and Arabic script come from Syria and what is now Saudi Arabia (Chapter 5), many examples that illustrate how the script developed have been found in the ‘abandoned’ southern portion of the old province. This ‘backwater’ is therefore of some importance to understanding the political position of the Roman Arabs, as well as the development of Arabic—an incredibly important signifier of later Arab religious and political identity.

Trajan in the east

In 113/14, the emperor Trajan launched an ambitious campaign in the east. The ‘official’ cause of the war was that the Parthian usurper Osroes, who was locked in a struggle with

the Parthian king Vologases III, had crowned a king in Armenia—one of the states, like Edessa, in the zone of conflict and competition between Rome and Parthia. Trajan had not been consulted about the choice of ruler, in contravention of the agreement over Armenia reached during the reign of Nero. Trajan's expedition, led by the emperor in person, represented a new phase in Roman expansion. Parthamasires, the king of Armenia nominated by Osroes, was deposed and killed, and Armenia became a short-lived Roman province in 114.¹⁸⁹ Mesopotamia was named a province in 115, and Adiabene was also conquered, apparently becoming the province of Assyria (although the very existence of this province has been questioned).¹⁹⁰ The city of Nisibis was captured, and the kingdom of Characene rather practically became a Roman friend for the duration of the war. A triumphal arch, of which little now remains, was built for Trajan at the Seleucid/Parthian fortress of Dura Europos on the Euphrates, in eastern Syria.¹⁹¹

By 116, Trajan was in the Parthian capital of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, and had placed a puppet on the Parthian throne, Parthaspates, who later ended up on the throne of Edessa. In a famous passage, Cassius Dio recalls Trajan comparing himself to Alexander, as he looked out over the Gulf, overcome by the magnitude of his achievements.¹⁹² The campaign, however, yielded mixed results. The 'friendship' of the Edessan king Abgar VII (109–16) had been confirmed as a matter of necessity on the outward march, as news of the fate of the Armenian king became known. Later, seeing Nisibis and Singara capitulate, Abgar becomes more fulsome in his pledges, but soon Edessa revolted, along with much of Mesopotamia, and the city was sacked and burned by Roman forces in 116.¹⁹³ Hatra, which had joined the revolt, also came under siege by Trajan's vengeful army. The terrible heat and swarms of insects plagued the Roman force, which abandoned the siege and moved on.¹⁹⁴ Trajan died on his return to Europe. On the way, he had stopped at Babylon:

...for he had gone there both because of its fame—though he saw nothing but mounds and stones and ruins to justify this—and because of Alexander, to whose spirit he offered sacrifice in the room where he had died.¹⁹⁵

It is a sobering thought that Babylon, like Hatra and Dura Europos later on (Chapter 3), could be ruins even to those who lived in antiquity (Figure 2.24).

There are brief mentions in the sources of Arab phylarchs caught up in the conflict. Cassius Dio describes a certain Sporaces, 'phylarch of Anthemusia', the Greek name for the city called Charax Sidou in the *Parthian Stations* of Isidore of Charax, which presided over a principality of the same name near Edessa.¹⁹⁶ Dio also mentions another Arab phylarch, Mannus. This individual was not, apparently, a king of Edessa, despite the similarity in name to many of the Edessan kings (Mannus or Manu), but was perhaps associated with the city of Singara.¹⁹⁷ Mannus and Sporaces appeared to have been fraught with indecision over whether to support Trajan or pledge their allegiance to the Parthian king. In the event, both snubbed the Roman emperor by failing to meet with him in person.¹⁹⁸ Mannus' position is of particular interest, as it is not clear whether he considered himself an ally of Rome, Parthia—or neither. His equivocation eventually led him to support Mebarsapes, the king of Adiabene, a choice which he came to regret.¹⁹⁹

The Parthian wars of Marcus Aurelius and Septimius Severus

An era of a little over a century separates the death of Trajan (117) and the collapse of the Arsacid dynasty in Parthia (224). A period of retrenchment, underwritten by the overwhelming



Figure 2.24 The Middle East in the time of Trajan. Illustration by the author.

dominance of Roman arms, set in under Hadrian (117–38) and Antoninus Pius (138–61). Hadrian visited the city of Gerasa in the province of Arabia, and was honoured in 130 with an immense triumphal arch that still stands today. As part of his eastern policy, Hadrian pulled the Roman army out of Trajan's new provinces, and the Parthians subsequently reasserted their control along the Euphrates. This apparently included extending Parthian influence amongst Arab populations in the region, using the frontier city of Dura Europos. According to one of the papyri discovered in excavations at Dura, the city was sometimes known as 'Europos by Arabia', evoking the Mesopotamian Arabia familiar from Xenophon.²⁰⁰ Another papyrus from the early years of Hadrian's reign (121) refers to a certain Mettolbaesos, an *Arabarchos* or 'Arab leader' subordinate to the Parthian king, although whether Mettolbaesos was governing a people (Arabs) or a region (Arabia, or the 'Arab' named at Edessa or Hatra) is not known.²⁰¹

Parthian dominance was short-lived, however; a new war with Rome began during the reign of co-emperors Marcus Aurelius (161–80) and Lucius Verus (161–69). The trigger was once again Armenia where, in 161, the Parthian king Vologases IV (147–91) installed a family member on the throne. A Roman attempt to respond under Marcus Sedatius Severianus ended in the massacre of the Roman forces at Elegeia. Subsequently, Vologases attacked Edessa, deposing king Manu (Mannus) VIII and installing his own preferred candidate, Wael (Tiridates, mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, became the governor of *rb* in place of Wael). The Roman response was swift, with the talented general Avidius Cassius capturing Edessa and then Dura Europos in 165, before sacking the Parthian capital at Seleucia-Ctesiphon. Mesopotamia was once again a major theatre of war, and while little is known of the campaign there, it is likely that Arab populations in the desert were forced to weigh their choices.²⁰² Manu VIII was reinstalled at Edessa, firmly marking out the city and its territory as a client dependent on Roman goodwill; this reality is expressed on coins minted under Manu, depicting him as ‘King Mannus, friend of the Romans’ (*philoromaios*). A Roman nominee was appointed to the throne of Armenia.²⁰³ (It was about this time that the Ruwafa inscriptions were set up in the Hijaz, far from the main action in Mesopotamia).

After the death of Marcus Aurelius’ son Commodus in 192, the Roman world was plunged into a vicious struggle for the imperial throne. The victor, Septimius Severus, campaigned vigorously over a period of several years in the eastern provinces where much of the support for his principal rival Pescennius Niger had been based. Niger had also enjoyed some help from the Parthians, and a Roman effort was directed towards the old enemy. The Parthian wars of Severus witnessed another successful expedition to Seleucia-Ctesiphon in 199, and Mesopotamia again became a Roman province, with its capital at Nisibis.²⁰⁴ There was another assault on Hatra, as its king had apparently supported Niger in the civil war; more pragmatically, perhaps, Hatra was a tempting target as the city held ‘a vast number of offering[s] to the Sun-God [Shamash] as well as vast sums of money.’²⁰⁵

Severus’ two Hatran campaigns (one, perhaps in 193/4 and the second in 197/8)²⁰⁶ suffered from many of the same problems that plagued that of Trajan. The lack of water, the ingenuity of the Hatran defenders, and the Arabian ‘barbarian cavalry’²⁰⁷ all caused severe difficulties. Herodian records (describing the second of the Roman attempts) that the Hatrans (Figure 2.25):

made clay containers filled with little flying insects that had poisonous stings, which were then fired off. When these missiles fell on to Severus’ army, the insects crawled into the eyes and exposed parts of the skin of the soldiers without being noticed and stung them, causing severe injuries. The soldiers could not stand the stifling atmosphere caused by the excessive heat of the sun and began to fall ill and die. The result was that most of the army was wiped out.²⁰⁸

Dio furnishes additional information about the hardships faced by the Roman army:

The archery, too, of the Atrani [Hatrans] was effective at very long range, since they hurled some of their missiles by means of engines, so that they actually struck many even of Severus’ guards...there were many hands and many bows hurling the missiles all at the same time. But they inflicted the greatest damage on their assailants when these approached the wall, and much more still after they had broken down a small portion of it; for they hurled down upon them, among things, the bituminous naphtha, of which I wrote above, and consumed the engines and all the soldiers on whom it fell.²⁰⁹

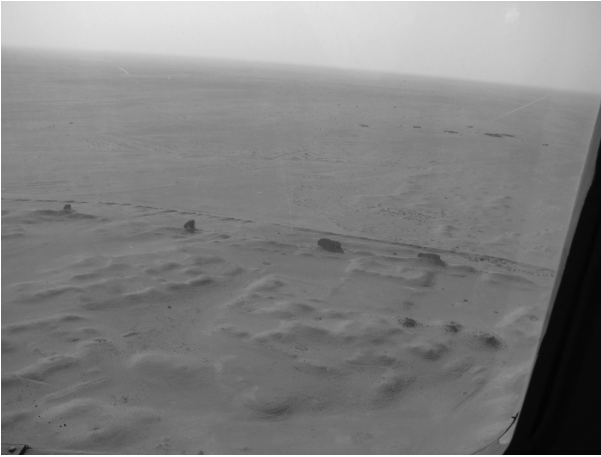


Figure 2.25 Aerial photograph of part of the defences at Hatra; the bleak landscape shows how difficult it was to sustain a besieging force for any length of time. Photograph by Suzanne E. Bott.

The failed siege was a source of considerable anger; according to Cassius Dio, some of the troops in the Roman army mutinied, and Severus gave up the siege after only twenty days.²¹⁰ Herodian goes on to say that the Roman troops ‘were so used to winning all their battles that they considered lack of success to be a defeat.’²¹¹ Nevertheless, Severus took the title *Arabicus* in celebration of his campaign, and the siege of Hatra is depicted on panel four of the Arch of Severus in Rome. Both Festus and Eutropius report the subjugation of the ‘inner *Arabes*’, a reference perhaps to the Arab phylarchs of Mesopotamia, but their identity is not clear.²¹² During the Parthian campaign, Osroëne had been annexed as a province in 195, although the king of Edessa, Abgar VIII (who may have once been a governor of *rb*)²¹³ retained his crown, and was honoured by Severus as ‘king of kings’. Coins issued by Abgar show his links to the empire, styling himself ‘Lucius Aelius Septimius Abgar’. Later, the Edessan monarchy was dissolved by Severus’ son, Caracalla; a Greek epitaph from Rome refers to ‘the former king Abgar’, perhaps referring to Abgar IX Severus, deposed by Caracalla.²¹⁴ Edessa then became a Roman colony, before passing under direct administration in 243. While the monarchy may have been reinstated at two points in the third century, the city firmly remained a Roman possession until the seventh, when it capitulated twice: once to the Persians, and then, following the restoration of Roman rule, again in the face of the Arab invasions of the Roman and Persian empires.²¹⁵

Conclusion

By the first quarter of the third century AD, the network of client states largely established by Pompey, and maintained with numerous changes by Augustus and his successors, had been dismantled due to a combination of imperial ambition, civil strife, and economic and political considerations (Figure 2.26).

With a couple of exceptions, all of the kingdoms and principalities identified as ‘Arabs’ by Roman writers eventually became part of the Roman provincial structure, or, like Hatra, would fall prey to the turmoil that followed the collapse of the Parthian monarchy in 224.



Figure 2.26 The Middle East in the time of Septimius Severus. Illustration by the author.

This would give the *scenitae* far greater prominence in the ancient sources, as the inexorable collapse of the borderlands between Rome and Parthia—the middle ground in which a Mannus or a Sporaces had wavered—vanished forever.

Notes

- 1 Green 1990.
- 2 Butcher 2003: 28; Rosenstein 2012; see the useful essays in Rosenstein and Morstein-Marx (eds) 2006.
- 3 Gregoratti 2017b; Dabrowa 2012; Curtis 2007; Butcher 2003; Ball 2016.
- 4 Butcher 2003: 20–1.

- 5 Dabrowa 2012: 171.
- 6 The literature on the establishment of Roman rule in the Middle East is extensive. For detailed studies see for example Butcher 2003 and 1994; Millar 1993a; Sartre 2005; Bowersock 1983; Ball 2016.
- 7 Sartre 2005: 150.
- 8 Strabo, 16.2.18, 34; Sartre 2005: 33; see Hoyland 2001: 69; Shahid 1984a: 5.
- 9 For this view of Palmyra see Macdonald *et al.* 2015: 13.
- 10 Strabo, 16.2.18, trans. Leonard Jones; Plutarch, *Pompey* 39.2.
- 11 Plutarch, *Lucullus* 21.4, trans. Perrin. Lucullus had also fought Arab militias during the Mithridatic War. Plutarch records a body of Arab troops slain by Lucullus' lieutenant Sextilius as the Romans closed the noose on Tigranes in 69 BC. See Plutarch, *Lucullus* 25.5–6, 26.4 and Schmitt 2005: 273.
- 12 Ptolemy, *Geography* 5.14.20; see Macdonald 2014: 149–50. Isaac 2000: 13.
- 13 Plutarch, *Pompey* 39.2, trans. Perrin.
- 14 Diodorus, 2.48, trans. Geer *et al.*; Strabo, 16.1.26: 'The parts of Mesopotamia which incline towards the south and are farther from the mountains, which are waterless and barren, are occupied by the Arabian Scenitae, a tribe of brigands and shepherds, who readily move from one place to another when pasture and booty fail them.' (trans. Leonard Jones).
- 15 Dabrowa 2012: 167; Shayegan 2011: 206; *Astronomical Diaries*, vol. 3, nos. 123 and 124 discussed in Shayegan 2011: 206.
- 16 Lenski 2011 provides the classic study of Arab raiding. See also the discussion in Chapter 3. For drought see e.g. Barsauma, *Letter 2 = Synodicon Orientale*, pp. 526–7 (discussed in Chapter 4); Marcellinus Comes addit. s.a. 536.11.
- 17 Isaac 1984 and Macdonald 1993 [=2009d]; see also Macdonald 2014: 150 and Shaw 1982.
- 18 For a useful summary see Sartre 2005: 233–9. See also Millar 1993a: 331, 440.
- 19 Strabo, 16.2.10–11; Ball 2016: 30–4.
- 20 C. Iulius Sohaemus, son of Sampsigeramus: *IGLS* 6.2760; Millar 1993a: 302; Ball 2016: 32–4; see also Cassius Dio, 50.13.17.
- 21 Millar 1993a: 34.
- 22 Cantineau 1931: 139.
- 23 Sartre 2005: 77.
- 24 Ball 2016: 35–7; Sartre 2005: 76–7; Millar 1993a: 303–6.
- 25 E.g. Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 13.1.2; Strabo, 16.4.2; Diodorus, 2.48.1.
- 26 Diodorus, 19.94.2–10, trans. Geer *et al.*; Hoyland 2001: 70–1.
- 27 Diodorus, 19.94.4, trans. Geer *et al.*; Macdonald 2001: 22 [=2009a V].
- 28 Renel and Mouton 2013. I am most grateful to Dr. Lucy Wadeson for this information.
- 29 Diodorus, 19.94.5, 8.
- 30 Diodorus, 19.94.4–5, trans. Geer *et al.*
- 31 Pliny, *Natural History* 12.32.58, 63; see Lewin 2014: 119.
- 32 Strabo, 16.4.21; Ball 2016: 74–8; Hoyland 2001: 142; Berkey 2003: 42.
- 33 *Periplus*, §19; Millar 1993a: 388–91, 401. Leuke Kome is now usually identified with Aynuna, although there is still some debate. See Tomber 2008: 68–71; Nappo 2010 and Lewin 2014: 120.
- 34 Millar 1993a: 389.
- 35 Diodorus, 19.94.1, 95.1, 96.1; Retsö 2003: 285–89; see Hoyland 2001: 70–1; Bowersock 1983: 12–18.
- 36 Diodorus, 19.97–8; Macdonald 2001 [=2009a, V]: 30.

- 37 Ball 2016: 65–6.
- 38 Macdonald *et al.* 2015; Macdonald 1998. For the debate over whether or not the Nabataeans were Arabs, see: e.g. Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 13.1.2; Strabo 16.4.18; Healey 1989; Shahid 1984a: 9; for a sober assessment, Macdonald 1999; see too Fisher 2011a, Chapter 4 and Retsö 2012.
- 39 Pliny, *Natural History* 5.20.2, 5.85; Edessan kings as Arabs: Tacitus, *Annals* 12.1, and see the discussion on the campaign of Crassus in this chapter. On various aspects of Edessan history, see Ross 2001; Drijvers and Healey 1999; Drijvers 1991; Bertinelli 1976; Segal 1970.
- 40 *Chronicle of Edessa*, 2; Ross 2001: 9. For the crossing see Gregoratti 2017b: 139.
- 41 The phrase of Richard Fowler, cited in Sommer 2013: 33. See Sommer 2013: 38–41 and Gregoratti 2017a for a discussion of Parthia's system of indirect rule.
- 42 Ball 2016: 93–6; for Edessa's foundation and early history, see Ross 2001: 5–28.
- 43 Healey 2009: 228–30, translated and discussed by Michael Macdonald in Macdonald *et al.* 2015: 42. See too Gregoratti 2017b: 139.
- 44 Macdonald *et al.* 2015: 40; see Ross 2001: 25–6.
- 45 Cassius Dio, 76.11.1.
- 46 Dirven (ed.) 2013 provides an excellent series of essays examining the site and the work carried out there. For an accessible selection of the inscriptions, see Healey 2009.
- 47 Strabo, 16.1.27 discussed by Gawlikowski 2013: 74; the development of Hatra may reflect the importance of a religious 'fixed point' in the landscape for nomads, a facet of current research into the relationship between Arabs and Christianity. See Chapters 3 and 4. For the water sources see Dirven 2006–2007.
- 48 The title 'Lord' is used by the rulers of Hatra until the reign of Sanatruq I (AD 162/3–176/7). The title 'king' was then bestowed; see Chapter 3 and Dirven 2006–2007: 373; Jakubiak 2012: 191; and Gregoratti 2013.
- 49 Foietta 2016.
- 50 Dirven 2006–2007; Gregoratti 2013; Ibrahim 1986: 93–4; Isaac 2013: 29–30. For the CORONA analysis see Altaweel and Hauser 2004 and see the valuable discussion in Palermo 2019: 103–5.
- 51 For the relief see al-Salihi 1998.
- 52 Macdonald *et al.* 2015: 35; Isaac 2013: 26; Hoyland 2001: 77–8; Segal 1984: 91–4, esp. 91: 'there can be no doubt of the Arab character of a significant, almost certainly the dominant, section of its population'.
- 53 The phrase of Dirven 2006–2007.
- 54 Maren and Shamash are often identified together, but could also be referred to separately on Hatran inscriptions. See Kaizer 2000.
- 55 Jakubiak 2013; Wood (P) 2015.
- 56 Summarised by de Jong 2013, discussing the work of Lucinda Dirven. See also Dirven 2009 (with ample illustrations). See too Fowlkes-Childs and Seymour 2019: 214.
- 57 Dirven 2006–2007: 375. See too Kaizer 2000 and Jakubiak 2012.
- 58 See the Channel 4 News report on cultural heritage destruction, including at Hatra: www.youtube.com/watch?v=g6SVJ0uPLUk (accessed November 28, 2018) together with the following: www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-31779484 and www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-39770395 (accessed January 29, 2019). Also see: http://unosat-maps.web.cern.ch/unosat-maps/IQ/CE20140613IRQ/UNOSAT_Ancient_City_of_Hatra_Iraq_26April2017.pdf (accessed February 4, 2019), and <https://gatesofnineveh.wordpress.com/2015/04/07/assessing-the-damage-at-hatra/> (accessed

- February 6, 2019), and www.asor-syrianheritage.org/incident-report-feature-hatra/ (accessed February 6, 2019).
- 59 See <https://gatesofnineveh.wordpress.com/2015/03/03/assessing-the-damage-at-the-mosul-museum-part-2-the-sculptures-from-hatra/> (accessed February 6, 2019).
- 60 Fowlkes-Childs and Seymour 2019: 215 and fig. 80. The relief appears to have been stolen between 2014 and 2017.
- 61 Wood (P) 2015: 7. See too Harmansah 2015 and Bunzel 2015 for a detailed examination of ISIS' ideology, especially 38–42, and for a highly accessible and detailed history of the group, see Weiss and Hassan 2015.
- 62 Wood (P) 2015.
- 63 Retsö 2003: 333; Gatier *et al.* 2002: 224. On Gerrha and its location see the detailed examination in Robin 2016 and Robin and Priolella 2013; see too Gregoratti 2011: 212.
- 64 Gregoratti 2011: 213.
- 65 Pliny, *Natural History* 6.136; Segal 1984: 90; Morony 1988: 8; Potts 1990, vol. 2: 8.
- 66 The opinion of Shayegan 2011: 206; for the second viewpoint, see Retsö 2003: 333.
- 67 Fowlkes-Childs and Seymour 2019: 229.
- 68 For the career of Meredat see Potts 1988b: 143–56.
- 69 Potts 1988b: 151.
- 70 Gregoratti 2019 and 2011: 209, 215–19; Potts 1997: 94–6; Teixidor 1984. On the Greek inscription (mentioning king Hyspaosines and Queen Thalassia) see Gatier *et al.* 2002.
- 71 Pliny, *Natural History* 6.31. Readers can learn more about and follow the project here: www.charaxspasinou.org/ (accessed March 13, 2019).
- 72 Appian, *Syrian Wars* 51; Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 14.80 and 14.103; see Bowersock 1983: 33–5. Retsö 2003: 393; Macdonald 1993: 323 [=2009d].
- 73 Dabrowa 2012: 172.
- 74 Cassius Dio, 40.26.3.
- 75 Cassius Dio, 40.20.3–4, 23; see Retsö 2003: 394; Millar 1993a: 457, n. 17; Ross 2001: 10; Grouchevoy 1995: 108–9.
- 76 Plutarch, *Crassus* 21.1, trans. Perrin.
- 77 Plutarch, *Crassus* 22.4–6, trans. Perrin.
- 78 Cassius Dio, 40.23.1.
- 79 Plutarch, *Crassus* 28.5, 31.7.
- 80 Ross 2001: 9; Segal 1984: 95.
- 81 See the comprehensive study in Grouchevoy 1995 and discussions in Chapters 3 and 4.
- 82 Strabo, 16.2.10; Cicero, *Letters to Friends* 15.1.1.
- 83 Grouchevoy 1995: 118; Strabo, 16.1.27.
- 84 Strabo, 16.2.10, trans. Leonard Jones; Cassius Dio, 40.20.1–2.
- 85 Cassius Dio, 36.2.5.
- 86 Cassius Dio, 40.20.1–2.
- 87 Strabo, 16.2.10; Cassius Dio, 47.27.3–4; Millar 1993a: 28; Schmitt 2005: 274, on the chronology of these events.
- 88 The phrase of White 2011.
- 89 Cassius Dio, 47.27.4, trans. Cary.
- 90 Lucan, *Pharsalia* 4. 64, 7.514.
- 91 Plutarch, *Antony* 36.2, trans. Perrin; Cassius Dio, 49.32.4; see Bowersock 1983: 41.
- 92 Plutarch, *Antony* 37.3.
- 93 Appian, *Civil Wars* 4.88; Millar 1993a: 28–9.

- 94 Plutarch, *Antony* 69.3, trans. Perrin.
- 95 Virgil, *Aeneid* 8.705–6.
- 96 See Syme 1939.
- 97 See Retsö 2003: 295; Macdonald 2001: 17 [=Macdonald 2009a, V]. On Berenike see now Sidebotham 2011.
- 98 Eratosthenes probably had access to Ariston's reports, but does not mention him in any surviving fragment. See the translation of Roller, 10–21; see too Retsö 2003: 302.
- 99 Macdonald 2001: 17 [=2009a V].
- 100 Polybius, 13.9.4. See Macdonald 2001: 28 [=2009a V]; Potts 2010a; Potts 1990, vol. 2: 92–5. For the Antiochus coins see Huth and Potts 2002.
- 101 Pliny, *Natural History* 6.38.
- 102 Eratosthenes, 195–7; Hoyland 2001: 70. See too Potts 1988a [=Potts 2010b III].
- 103 Nicander 101, lines 105–6. See discussion in Potts 1990, vol. 2: 91–2.
- 104 Jasim and Yousif 2014; Potts 2012; for a study of the coins see Macdonald 2010c. For the temple of Shamash at Ed-Dur see Haerink 2012 and for Ed-Dur's links to eastern trade routes see Daems 2004. For Roman pottery at Ed-Dur see Rutten 2007.
- 105 See Potts 1990, vol. 2: 155–96; 2010c, 2010d; Huth 2010; Callot 2010; Huth and Potts 2002.
- 106 Robin 2015a: 117.
- 107 Agatharchides 89a. See also Hoyland 2001: 25, 40–1; McLaughlin 2010; Sidebotham 2011. For Minaean wives see Potts 2010c: 41.
- 108 Strabo, 16.3.1; Macdonald 2001: 18 [=2009a V].
- 109 See discussion in Eratosthenes, 193–4.
- 110 Strabo, 16.4.2.
- 111 Diodorus, 2.51.1, trans. Geer *et al.*.
- 112 Diodorus, 3.46.5, trans. Geer *et al.*. See Macdonald 2001: 21–3 [=2009a V].
- 113 Strabo, 16.4.22, trans. Leonard Jones.
- 114 For Qani see Mouton *et al.* 2008. Later, maritime traffic came to play a far greater role in moving goods from South Arabia and in linking Egypt with India. The last known inscription mentioning a caravan from the Arabian Peninsula, from Hima (about 100 km northeast of Najran), dates to the first century AD (see Robin 2015a: 116), although Robin now thinks that caravan traffic began again between Najran and al-Hira later on; see Chapters 3, 4, and 5. See also *Periplus*, §27–28; Young 2001: 95–6, 99–100; Hoyland 2001: 43–5.
- 115 Strabo, 16.4.22; Hoyland 2001: 44–5; Sidebotham 1986: 121 argues that there was no concerted plan to dominate the whole of the Red Sea. See too Sidebotham 2011: 5.
- 116 Potts 1997: 95–6; Gregoratti 2019 and 2011: 217, discussing *Periplus*, §36.
- 117 *Periplus*, §33; Sidebotham 1986: 120–30; Hoyland 2001: 26, 45. Potts 2012: 136; Potts 1997: 95. Pottery: see Potts 2010c: 29. See also for discussion Potts 1990, vol. 2: 111–14, 146–52, 228–9, 274–88.
- 118 Augustus, *Res Gestae* 26.5.
- 119 Sartre 2005: 66; Retsö 2003: 402, argues that Gallus did reach Marib, and in n. 67, offers the relevant bibliography for the problem. The remains of ancient Baraqish are extremely impressive; see Schiettecatte 2011: 51–7.
- 120 Ball 2016: 128–30.
- 121 Strabo, 16.4.22–3.
- 122 Ball 2016: 130.
- 123 Costa 1977 and Marek 1994, discussed by Sartre 2005: 66.

- 124 Strabo, 16.4.23–5; Macdonald 2001 [2009a, V]: 22–3.
- 125 Strabo, 16.4.23.
- 126 Strabo, 16.4.24, trans. Leonard Jones.
- 127 Strabo, 16.4.25.
- 128 Strabo, 16.4.25, trans. Leonard Jones.
- 129 Strabo, 16.4.24, trans. Leonard Jones.
- 130 Strabo, 16.4.23; Ball 2016: 131–2; Bowersock 1983: 47.
- 131 Pliny, *Natural History* 12.32.
- 132 Retsö 2003: 403.
- 133 Strabo, 16.4.24, trans. Leonard Jones; Sartre 2005: 66; Sidebotham 1986: 129.
- 134 Retsö 2003: 403.
- 135 Retsö 403–5, for a detailed overview of Juba’s text; Potts 1990, vol. 2: 22; See Sidebotham 2011: 13–15 for discussion on other ‘intelligence gathering’ efforts.
- 136 Sidebotham 1986: 127.
- 137 *Periplus*, §23, trans. Casson. See Hoyland 2001: 46–7 and Sidebotham 1986: 127–8. For discussions on chronology, see Casson’s commentary on the *Periplus* (150–1).
- 138 Of the numerous mentions, see e.g. Augustus, *Res Gestae* 31.1. See also Sartre 2005: 67 and Sidebotham 1986: 129.
- 139 See Potts 1995.
- 140 Ph 103 and Ph 135a. For the Sabaeen texts see the discussion in Schiettecatte and Arbach 2016: 186; see also Robin 1996b, col. 1131–1133.
- 141 Nebes 2006; Schiettecatte and Arbach 2016: 186.
- 142 Ja 772 (Marib) and an unpublished text, T.02B 22. See Schiettecatte and Arbach 2016: 187.
- 143 An oblique reference in the *Periplus*, §26 reports that ‘Caesar’ sacked a settlement called ‘Eudaimon Arabia’, usually identified as Aden (not to be confused with the *region* of Arabia known as Eudaemon, i.e., Yemen). According to the author of the *Periplus*, this happened ‘not long before our time’. However, while numerous theories have been offered, ranging from attacks by emperors from Augustus to Severus, it seems that this is best interpreted as a reference to the campaign of Gallus. See Casson’s discussion in *Periplus*, 158–60 and Sidebotham 1986: 130–2.
- 144 On Gaius see Pliny, *Natural History* 6.160; cf. Bowersock 1983: 58: ‘He undoubtedly had no desire to repeat the error of Aelius Gallus.’
- 145 Cassius Dio, 56.33.4, trans. Cary.
- 146 For discussion of this passage see D. Violante in Macdonald *et al.* 2015: 72; Retsö 2003: 416–17. See Herodotus, 2.8, 3.5, and 4.39 and Macdonald 2001: 5–8 [=2009a V].
- 147 Retsö 2003: 421–2.
- 148 John Lydus, *On the Months* 4.104, discussed by Schmitt 2005: 275.
- 149 Josephus, *Jewish Wars* 3.168; Tacitus, *Histories* 6.1, trans. Moore; Millar 1993a: 75.
- 150 See *Wadd.* 2203 and 2112 respectively, and the discussion by Millar 1993a: 430.
- 151 Macdonald 2014: 156.
- 152 *Wadd.* 2112.
- 153 Nehmé 2015: 115 for the *strategos* at Hegra (JSNab 38).
- 154 Macdonald 2014: 156; see Sartre 1982: 122–8.
- 155 Macdonald 2014. For a recent selection of translated Safaitic inscriptions with commentaries and photographs, see Macdonald *et al.* 2015: 22–28.
- 156 Macdonald 2014: 146, 163. On Ancient North Arabian, see Macdonald 2000 and 2004. A useful overview is also provided by Sartre 2005: 233–9. Notably, no Safaitic

- inscription ever mentions the word 'Arab'. See M.C.A. Macdonald in Macdonald *et al.* 2015.
- 157 Macdonald 2014: 146.
- 158 Macdonald 2014: 145, 162.
- 159 Macdonald 2014: 147.
- 160 Macdonald 2014: 150.
- 161 The exact date is disputed. See Sartre 2005: 80; Millar 1993a: 91–3.
- 162 Commagene was previously annexed in AD 17, became independent in *c.* 37, then almost immediately re-annexed. It became independent again in 41, and then was finally annexed for good in 72. See Sartre 2005: 74–6.
- 163 Josephus, *Jewish War* 7.7.1; Millar 1993a: 81. For a detailed discussion see Isaac 2000: 39–40.
- 164 Cassius Dio, 68.14.5; Millar 1993a: 93. For the governors of Arabia, see Sartre 1982: 78–120.
- 165 Sartre 2005: 86–7; Millar 1993a: 407.
- 166 See Nehmé *et al.* 2010 and Fiema *et al.* 2015.
- 167 Sartre 2005: 86–7; Macdonald 2014: 148.
- 168 See Lewin 2014: 126; Freeman 1996; Fiema 1987; Butcher 2003: 44–5; Bowersock 1983: 79–80; Young 2001: 56; Sartre 2005: 133–4; Millar 1993a: 93: 'speculation on motives, whether simply the occasion of the king's death, or local disputes, or (improbably) interest in trade routes, is fruitless.' On Trajan's 'ambitions', see Isaac 2000: 119, who also notes memorably that 'rude behaviour or bad grammar may have been the reason for Trajan's decision. The Romans did not agonize about the annexation of a client kingdom.' On the Red Sea see Nappo 2015b.
- 169 Millar 1993a: 93.
- 170 See Lewin 2014: 128–30. Macdonald 2014: 153–4 discusses the possibility that clashes between Roman and Nabataean troops are reflected in some of the Safaitic inscriptions.
- 171 For an up to date discussion of late antique Petra, see Z.T. Fiema and L. Nehmé in Fiema *et al.* 2015: 388–94.
- 172 Bowersock 1983: 91–2.
- 173 See Graf 1995.
- 174 Millar 1993a: 96–7 Graf 1992. For the inscriptions see Nehmé 2017.
- 175 Bowersock 1983: 96, n. 19, and 98 and pl. 14; al-Talhi and al-Daire 2005. An inscription dating to between 175 and 177 records the reconstruction of part of the city wall of Hegra, in conjunction with two centurions of the *Legio III Cyrenaica*.
- 176 Sartre 1982: 34; Bowersock 1983: 96, n. 19.
- 177 Speidel 1977: 687; Millar 1993a: 95; Sartre 2005: 138; Graf 1988: 192–196; Nehmé 2009. For the date of the graffiti, see Sartre 1982: 34.
- 178 Millar 1993a: 96; Bowersock 1983: 98 and pl. 14. See too Pliny, *Natural History* 6.37.146 and Ptolemy, *Geography* 5.19.7.
- 179 Phillips *et al.* 2004; Nappo 2015b: 65–6.
- 180 Macdonald *et al.* 2015: 53–4.
- 181 A new translation of these important texts, with a detailed commentary, plans, and photographs, is now available. See M.C.A. Macdonald in Macdonald *et al.* 2015: 44–56.
- 182 Agatharchides of Cnidus, 94a and map on xii; see Macdonald *et al.* 2015: 46.
- 183 Macdonald *et al.* 2015: 48.
- 184 Macdonald *et al.* 2015: 53.

- 185 Macdonald 2009b: 298.
- 186 Villeneuve 2014.
- 187 Macdonald 2009b: 300–1; for a detailed discussion of the frontier, see Sartre 1982: 17–22, and 34, suggesting that the frontier was in fact fixed. For the province, see the extremely useful study of provincial reorganisation in Sipilä 2009.
- 188 For detailed treatments of the history of the *Provincia Arabia*, see Bowersock 1983; Fiema and Nehmé in Fiema *et al.* 2015: 375–95.; Lewin 2014: 125–39; Millar 1993a: 414–28. For the army in Arabia, see Spiedel 1977 and Isaac 2000: 118–31.
- 189 Millar 1993a: 84, 99; Butcher 2003: 45.
- 190 Millar 1993a: 101: ‘the first sign of a strategic commitment which would last for centuries’. For questions over Assyria see Lightfoot 1990 and Sartre 2005: 145–6; Palermo 2019: 28–9.
- 191 Dura Europos was founded by Seleucus I in 300 BC, but with the collapse of Seleucid power, had come under Parthian control. See Ball 2016: 191–7 for an historical sketch, and Chapter 5.
- 192 Cassius Dio, 68.29.1.
- 193 Cassius Dio, 68.30.2; Butcher 2003: 45–6; Ross 2001: 33–4.
- 194 Cassius Dio, 68.31; see Isaac 2013 and Sommer 2013.
- 195 Cassius Dio, 68.30.1, trans. Cary.
- 196 Charax Sidou/Anthemusia is sometimes identified as Batnae or Serug. It should not be confused with the city of Spasinou Charax mentioned earlier. See Millar 1993a: 440; Butcher 2003: 46; Ross 2001: 27; Chaumont 1984.
- 197 Ross 2001: 34; Schmitt 2005: 276.
- 198 Cassius Dio, 68.18.1, 21.1; see Isaac 2000: 238. On the identity of Mannus, see Retsö 2003: 434.
- 199 Cassius Dio, 68.22.
- 200 *P. Dura* 22, cited in Millar 1993a: 448; Ross 2001: 25.
- 201 Retsö 2003: 439; Segal 1984: 98.
- 202 Sartre 2005: 132–50; Millar 1993a: 90–140.
- 203 Millar 1993a: 112–13; see Ross 2001: 36.
- 204 For the evidence concerning the provincial arrangements of Osroëne and Mesopotamia, see Palermo 2019: 36–41.
- 205 Cassius Dio, 75.12.2, trans. Cary.
- 206 Palermo 2019: 99 discusses the chronology.
- 207 Cassius Dio, 75.11.1, trans. Cary.
- 208 Herodian, 3.9.1–8, trans. Whittaker.
- 209 Cassius Dio, 75.11.2–3, trans. Cary.
- 210 Cassius Dio, 75.12.1–5.
- 211 Herodian, 3.9.1–8, trans. Whittaker.
- 212 Eutropius, 18.4; Festus, 21.10. cf. *Historia Augusta, Severus* 18.1. See the discussion in Retsö 2003: 458–9.
- 213 Macdonald *et al.* 2015: 40.
- 214 Possekkel 2016: 458–9.
- 215 Ross 2001: 46–68; Sartre 2005: 136; Millar 1993a: 125; Segal 1984: 95.

3 Enemies, allies, and pretenders, AD 211–500

Introduction

The spectacular Roman triumphs over the Parthians during the second century were a vivid testament to the power of Roman arms, but they had been won against something of a paper tiger. The Arsacid dynasty was weakening. During the reign of Septimius Severus, a revolt against the Parthian throne had begun under a man named Pabag, whose son, Ardashir, would emerge as the first of the ‘Sasanian’ kings of Persia (224–42). Pabag was a priest of the Zoroastrian cult of Anahita at Istakhr, the capital of Fars (Persis), one of the most important of the Parthian satrapies and the old heartland of the Achaemenid Persian empire. The conjoining of the political and the religious in the revolt was highly significant, because the political identity of the Sasanian empire would be largely shaped by the close ties between the new kings and the Zoroastrian priesthood.¹ By 224, Fars had come under Sasanian control, and in the same year, Ardashir defeated and killed the Parthian king Ardawan (Artabanus) at Hormozgan. Meanwhile, Septimius Severus had died while on campaign in England in 211, and while in theory the throne passed equally to his sons, strife between the violent and bloodthirsty Caracalla (who imagined himself as a latter day Alexander the Great) and the more mild-mannered Geta resulted in the latter’s brutal murder before the year was out.² Caracalla then launched an expedition against the Parthians, honouring Achilles at Troy on the way before allowing Roman troops to plunder the Parthian royal tombs at Arbela (Erbil in Kurdistan).³ Caracalla was murdered shortly afterwards as he dismounted from his horse to relieve himself.⁴ Following the brief reigns of Macrinus and the eccentric Elegabalus, the Roman throne passed to Alexander Severus, whose murder in the spring of 235 during an army mutiny at Moguntiacum (Mainz) would mark the end of the Severan dynasty, and the beginning of a tumultuous period in Roman history commonly known as the ‘Third Century Crisis’.⁵

Rome and Persia

Ardashir immediately set about establishing his credentials, founding a new city adjacent to Ctesiphon, called Veh Ardashir,⁶ campaigning against Hatra (below), bringing Persian client kings into line, and putting Roman forces under intense and sustained pressure throughout the east. Taking Hatra, in particular, opened the door to further conquests in Mesopotamia and Osroëne.⁷ The Romans fought back, with mixed results; according to one tradition, Alexander Severus suffered a calamitous defeat at the hands of Ardashir, with Herodian remarking that ‘it is not easy to recall another like it, one in which a great army was destroyed, an army inferior in strength and determination to none of the armies of old’.⁸ Other sources, claiming

victory over Ardashir, soften the fate of the Roman soldiers by attributing their casualties to disease and the return march through difficult country in Armenia.⁹ Even if the reports from some Roman observers of Ardashir's desire to win back the lands of the Achaemenids lost to Alexander the Great in 330 BC—which would have included much of the Roman east—are met today with some scepticism, the military threat was very real.¹⁰ The rebranded Persian monarchy was backed by several important features, such as: a rigidly organised society; a militant outlook, combined with a formidable new type of armoured cavalry; the systematic codification of the Zoroastrian religion under its chief priest, Kerdir, who was preceded by Tansar (Tosar) as the 'spiritual authority' to Ardashir; and a greater facility with logistics than its Parthian predecessor. Sasanian kings also exercised a firm grip over the money supply, and even in times of extraordinary crisis the silver content of Sasanian drachms rarely dropped below 95%, a figure of envy, no doubt, to their Roman neighbours.¹¹

There was also a degree of what we would today think of as religiously infused 'nationalism' in the Sasanian outlook. On their inscriptions Sasanian kings referred to themselves as kings of Iran (*Iranshahr*), both a place where Iranians lived as well as a powerful idea within the Zoroastrian holy text, the Avesta. Outside *Iranshahr* lay a corresponding region containing 'the Iranian influenced peoples'—known as an- (or 'un-') Iran.¹² This stark dualism affected royal ideology and self-representation on inscriptions and carved reliefs, where military triumphs and the divine investiture of royal power were the dominant themes.¹³ Indeed, Sasanian kings had little difficulty in portraying themselves as a monarchy for all, an image represented through the repeated and violent subjugation of their foes, while the inclusion of 'an-Iran' in the royal titlature of Ardashir's son, Shapur I, appears to have represented 'an all-encompassing projection of might' that envisaged no specific territorial limit, hitting back at Rome's long-held idea of *imperium sine fines*.¹⁴ The Roman emperors Gordian III and Philip 'the Arab'¹⁵ were both worsted in battle, and in 260 Shapur achieved a momentous victory over the Roman army at Edessa, capturing the emperor Valerian along with much of his senior staff. At the same time, however, the ideological dualism of the Sasanian kings permitted the Roman emperors to be worthy of partnership with the Sasanian monarchs in a form of universal rule. In the Iranian cosmology, the Romans could be conceptualised as a 'renegade province' of Iran. They were linked genealogically with the Sasanian kings in the distant past, but had strayed away from the good through acts of deceit.¹⁶ As the *SKZ*, Shapur's autobiographical manifesto from Naqsh-e Rostam, near Persepolis, shows, Roman dishonesty inevitably brought swift and punitive retribution.¹⁷

Following the capture of Valerian, the city of Palmyra proved a timely saviour after the Roman collapse at Edessa. After fending off Shapur's forces and stabilising the eastern provinces, however, Palmyra rebelled under its queen, Zenobia, and the Palmyrene army reached as far as Egypt. The revolt was eventually quashed by Aurelian in 272, and in the process one of the last remaining buffers between Rome and Persia was eliminated.¹⁸ The period of crisis in the Roman empire was ended by Diocletian and the Tetrarchy, the famous 'rule of four' that addressed security crises by subdividing the empire between senior emperors and their junior partners. Diocletian was a blunt and candid general, famously making his deputy Galerius 'run by his chariot for several miles in his scarlet robes' after the latter returned from an embarrassing defeat at Persian hands.¹⁹ On his second attempt Galerius had more luck, defeating the Sasanian king Narseh and capturing his family. With the resulting Peace of Nisibis in 298/9, Rome temporarily gained the upper hand.²⁰ However, the treaty proved false hope to those who might have wished for a new *pax Romana*. Renewed war with the Persians, led by the emperor Julian, ended in disaster with his death in combat in 363; peace was purchased at a steep price, as the Romans surrendered to the Sasanians what they had

earlier won with the Peace of Nisibis.²¹ The two empires went to war several times in the fifth century and repeatedly throughout the sixth, while in the seventh, a massive Persian invasion would succeed in capturing almost all of the eastern Roman provinces and come close to taking Constantinople, which had become the capital of the eastern Roman provinces after the empire was divided in 395.²²

The relationship between the twin capitals of Constantinople and Ctesiphon was complex, featuring periods of savage warfare punctuated by mutually beneficial trading relationships, diplomatic exchanges, and periods of collaboration and peace.²³ Indeed, the Sasanian king Khusrau II (590/1–628) in a letter to the Roman emperor Maurice (582–602), would call the empires ‘two eyes’, noting that ‘by these greatest powers the disobedient and bellicose tribes are winnowed and man’s course is continually regulated and guided’.²⁴ Universal rule might be thinkable, after all. In the early fifth century it was even possible that the heir to the Roman throne might be adopted by the Persian king, while Constantius II (337–61) and Shapur II (309–79) addressed each other as ‘brother’.²⁵ On the other hand, an unrelenting and keen competition lay between Rome and Persia, ground out on the bleak and dusty battlefields of Mesopotamia, Armenia, and the Caucasus. The relationship between Rome and Parthia had, to some extent, been similar, but whereas in the first and second centuries a dense web of client states had separated the two empires, the near total collapse of this system by the third century meant that the peoples of the borderlands and the periphery, no longer distant from imperial laws, agents, armies, and so on, faced a rapidly diminishing window for any sort of political neutrality or semi-independence. Peoples who had previously dealt with the rulers of Palmyra or Hatra, and to whom Roman or Persian authority had been experienced as a delegated authority wielded by such local officials, now treated first-hand with imperial representatives. This was a substantial and meaningful change in the political landscape of the Middle East.

Monotheism and empire

Another important factor was the increasingly important correlation between religious choice and political allegiance.²⁶ The close links between the Zoroastrian priesthood and the Sasanian kings meant that Zoroastrian communities and the Zoroastrian religion were unavoidably associated with the Sasanian state. Kerdir, whose astonishing career spanned that of six Sasanian monarchs, played an important role in reviving the Zoroastrian faith and embedding it in almost every level of Persian society.²⁷ The connection between kingship and the divine was made clear by coins, inscriptions, and royal reliefs. Ardashir’s coinage bears the title ‘king of kings’²⁸ of Iran, whose lineage [is] from the gods’, a formula taken up by his successors before it changed once again under Yazdegerd II (438–57).²⁹ The Middle Persian text of the *SKZ* begins with ‘I, the Mazda worshipping lord Shapur, king of kings of Iran and non-Iran’³⁰, whose lineage [is] from the gods’.³¹ At Naqsh-e Rostam, Ardashir is shown mounted on horseback receiving the right to rule (represented by a ring) over *Iranshahr* from the Zoroastrian god Ohrmazd himself. The defeated Parthian king Ardawan lies trampled under the hooves of Ardashir’s horse; Ohrmazd, also mounted, presides triumphant over Ahriman, the evil force in the Zoroastrian religion. The inscription reflects an ideology of ‘divinely inspired kingship and irresistible victory’, and the representation of Ohrmazd in human form connected the god to Ardashir in an explicit and personal way that was a sharp departure from earlier Persian iconography.³² A later relief from Naqsh-e Rostam shows Ardashir once again receiving the ring of royal power; a nearby inscription reads ‘the Zoroastrian faith had died out, but I, king of kings, restored it’.³³ In the late third century, as Kerdir’s power

was solidified, a wave of persecution targeted Jews, Christians, Buddhists, and adherents of Mani, the Manicheans; Mani himself had been summoned to the royal court under Bahram II (274–93), and was later executed.

Following the victory of Constantine over his rivals in the early fourth century, it was not long before some of the empire's neighbours adopted Christianity, and, in the process, drifted inexorably closer to Rome's political goals. Aksum, Armenia, and Caucasian Iberia were all early adoptees, while Constantine's campaigns against the Goths resulted in their receipt of a bishop, Ulfilas, and a Gothic edition of the Bible.³⁴ The association between the empire and Christianity's universal, evangelical appeal was particularly potent, offering the lure of membership in a single commonwealth, with a single religion, under a single ruler and a single god. In a sense, the Christian commonwealth had no borders, and by involving himself from the beginning with Christian ecumenical councils, Constantine rebranded the occupant of the imperial throne as a viceroy of God, an arbiter for Christians no matter where they lived.³⁵ Therefore—and despite the involvement of the Sasanian monarchy in synods and intra-Christian disputes in Persia—the idea that Christians beyond the Roman frontier came under the protection of the Roman emperor inevitably caused friction with Persia, while religious persecution could be used as a powerful political tool to enforce boundaries and expectations.³⁶

On the other hand, despite this apparent narrowing of choice, 'orthodoxy', the correct set of beliefs, was a moving target.³⁷ It would be misleading to imagine that at any one time the institutionally sanctioned religious practises in either Rome or Persia necessarily translated into well-delineated, homogeneous groups, even if the occasional and often shocking episodes of religious violence between different communities conspicuously reinforced the boundaries between orthodox and heretic. There were a number of options for those deemed to be non-orthodox, and there was also considerable leeway in what could be tolerated. In the case of Christianity, this was because there was a substantial overlap in the different ideas about how the divine and human natures of Christ were understood, and also because repeated councils designed to determine orthodoxy failed to meet their aims. The question was deceptively simple: did Christ's divine and human natures exist together, but divided, as Nestorius, the patriarch of Constantinople between 428 and 431, had argued—resulting in a position known as Dyophysitism or Nestorianism? Or were they fused together within Christ himself, an idea developed from several theologians, and known as Monophysitism (or Miaphysitism)? The council convened at Chalcedon in 451 to provide the last word on this divisive topic came up with a magnificently opaque answer: Christ indeed had two natures, the assembled delegates decided, but they were found 'in one person'. What seemed to many to be a rather 'Nestorian conclusion' to the problem left various groups of Christians in dismay. Those included the Monophysites, who were profoundly disadvantaged by the fact that, after 451, the supporters of Chalcedon (the 'Chalcedonians') often found themselves with the benefit of imperial support. Nevertheless, Monophysites formed important communities in the eastern parts of the Levant as well as in several locations outside the empire, including one at the oasis and ancient caravan stop at Najran in South Arabia.³⁸ Often mistreated by the state, Monophysites also experienced periods of tolerance and accommodation and sincere efforts to return them to the orthodox fold. Such twists and turns in policy were largely dependent on whoever occupied the imperial throne in Constantinople.³⁹

The Nestorians were also sidelined by the council of Chalcedon, which, despite its murky pronouncements, was widely seen to reinforce the rejection of Nestorianism made at the Council of Ephesus in 431. Increasingly, Nestorians found refuge in Persia, especially once the emperor Zeno had pushed what was known as 'the school of the Persians' out of the

empire in 489.⁴⁰ But Christianity had, in fact, long been established in Persia, most likely helped by the third-century deportation of Roman captives and prisoners of war, together with the movement of traders and the porous nature of zones of interstate rivalry such as Osroëne.⁴¹ Christians in Persia were savagely persecuted during the reign of Shapur II; one sensationalist account, the *Chronicle of Arbela*, claims that the persecutors were ‘like wild dogs’ who ‘daily licked the coagulum of our blood, which like a bog coloured red the markets and alleys of our city’.⁴² The Persian Christian communities survived, however, and later, borrowing Roman ideas about church administration, created an organisation that became known as the ‘Church of the East’ and which would follow Nestorian, Dyophysite views based on the thinking of Theodore of Mopsuestia, within whose orbit Nestorius had worked.⁴³ The Church of the East was established through a synod at Seleucia-Ctesiphon in 410 that instituted bishops, a network of episcopal sees, and established the authority of the *catholicos* in the capital.⁴⁴

The synod itself was convened by Yazdegerd I (399–420), who sought to offset the potentially disruptive Christian leaders by drawing them into the institutions of royal patronage.⁴⁵ This shift from fourth-century persecution to fifth-century accommodation was a recognition of the growing importance of Christians in Persia. At the same time, the Christological/theological positions taken by Persian Christians represented an attempt to realign their communities away from the orthodoxy broadcast from Constantinople, and find a position free from Roman political associations.⁴⁶ The favourable treatment of Christians by Sasanian monarchs was an effective counterweight to the catholic role of the Roman emperor, and Persian bishops could claim with some credibility to be acting not as representatives of the Roman Christian commonwealth, but of the Sasanian monarchy.⁴⁷ But this was no impediment to Persian Christians writing anti-Zoroastrian polemical texts, an exercise that delineated their faith from that of their kings. A predictable result of such subversive activity was royal persecution, to which not even a *catholicos* could be immune; the Sasanian king Peroz (459–84) was famously said to have suspended the *catholicos* Babowai by a single finger until he died.⁴⁸ Another way to manage Christian dissent was a form of dispute resolution that allowed different ideas to be aired, often in front of the king himself. At such councils, there was rarely any kind of resolution. Instead, the point was to discuss difference: in this way, the unwieldy contradictions between Christianity and Zoroastrianism could be raised with an ‘artfully orchestrated ambiguity’ that acknowledged Christian belief without jeopardising the position of Zoroastrianism. It was in this way that Christians in Persia came to occupy important roles in the Sasanian court, and the Sasanian kings harnessed the Christian communities in Persia to their own politics and ideology.⁴⁹

It may seem today that these different religious communities were very distinct from one another, but the boundaries that divided them were not always so obvious in antiquity. Political developments in Rome and Persia changed, weakened, strengthened, or threatened cosmological links between the divine and the throne, and therefore the religious/political dimension of the relationship between the throne and different communities. Yazdegerd I’s efforts to bring Persian Christians into the structures of the state, but then the later, reactionary pushback against the idea of pluralist empire by the mid-fifth century, are both useful examples of how political changes impacted religious communities, legitimising or delegitimising them in the process.⁵⁰ At the community level, there was also a certain amount of overlap between the views held by different groups, such as Chalcedonians, Monophysites, and Nestorians; the closer the overlap, the louder the individual claims to represent the orthodox position. There were also splinter groups and sects-within-sects that claimed orthodoxy for themselves, and labels did not always stick: opponents of Chalcedon could claim that the

Chalcedonians were Nestorians, while the term was also used, disapprovingly, for Persian Christians. There was also a group that called itself ‘the Real Monophysites’, extremist proponents of the position, and other sects such as the Neo-Chalcedonians and Tritheists emerged to complicate an already muddled situation.⁵¹ In Persia there were also communities of polytheists, Manicheans, and Buddhists, as well as Jews, whose exilarch lived in Ctesiphon. There was an ancient community of Jews at Hegra in northwestern Arabia, and other Jewish communities could be found throughout Arabia, including at Tayma, Khaybar, and Yathrib (Medina), products of the diaspora that followed the vicious war against the Jews prosecuted by Vespasian’s son Titus in AD 70. As discussed in more detail below, a form of Judaism would come to the fore in South Arabia.⁵² Nor could Nestorian Christians claim to be the orthodox Christian community in Persia, as a rival group of Monophysites established themselves there after 410.⁵³ Zoroastrianism, too, was not necessarily confined to Persia. On his own inscription on the Kaba of Zoroaster at Naqsh-e Rostam (the *KKZ*), the priest Kerdīr claimed to have ‘put in order those magi and fire altars which were for the territory outside Iran’, naming Antioch, Syria, Cilicia, Cappadocia, and a host of other regions.⁵⁴

Many of the places that featured in the wars of the earlier era continued to occupy prominent roles between the third and sixth centuries. Armenia, in particular, remained a point of bitter dispute as a number of hold-outs and aristocrats loyal to the old Parthian regime had sought refuge there after the Parthian monarchy was toppled. This status earned Armenia a punitive expedition by Shapur and the installation of a loyal client, Tiridates.⁵⁵ The cities of Mesopotamia, including Edessa, Carrhae, and Nisibis, were often under siege, and Shapur even captured Antioch briefly in 252/3. While a number of the cities of Mesopotamia and further west were sacked, captured, or changed hands, the wars in the north failed to deliver any definitive results, and this stalemate would help to rekindle Roman and Persian interest in the Arabian Peninsula. However, the two empires soon encountered a new force in this arena—the kingdom of Himyar.

Amidst all of the political and religious changes that took place between the death of Septimius Severus and the turn of the sixth century, including the dramatic increase in settlement in late antiquity, which promoted greater contact between different peoples, Arab communities that were hitherto largely invisible in the sources assumed greater prominence in the religious, cultural, and political life of the Middle East.⁵⁶ Arab groups encountered Christian holy men in the steppes and desert and, adopting Christianity, became the objects of fascination for Christian writers. Others found political alliance with Rome, Persia, or Himyar, and were recorded on imperial inscriptions and even commissioned inscriptions themselves. The increased visibility of Arabs in the historical sources reflects this more prominent role, a position achieved not only as a result of the expansionist policies of the Great Powers, but also because of the collapse of those local states which had previously insulated the centre from the outside.

The end of Hatra, Sasanians in Oman, and Himyarites in *Arabia Deserta*

With the collapse of the Arsacid monarchy, the ‘Parthian Near West’ swiftly came under Sasanian control. One of the first targets was Hatra. The city had apparently strengthened its links with the Parthian royalty after AD 170, when its rulers became known as kings, rather than ‘lords’; it is likely that this change in title was sanctioned from Ctesiphon in the context of the wars that took place during the reign of Marcus Aurelius (Chapter 2).⁵⁷ Hatra’s greater prominence and links with the Parthian monarchy turned it into a promising objective for Ardashir, and, if anything, it had become even more tempting during the reign of its last

king, Sanatruq II, when the city had undergone a rapprochement with Rome. An important result of this shift in loyalty—a pragmatic response by the king to the collapsing fortunes of the Arsacids—was the dispatch of a Roman garrison, the *IX Cohors Maurorum Gordianae*, apparently quartered in the southern part of the city after 235. One of three Latin inscriptions found at temple IX⁵⁸ at Hatra is a dedication, reading:

To the Unconquered Sun God [*sol invictus*, i.e., Shamash], Quintus Petronius Quintianus, military tribune of the First Parthian Legion,⁵⁹ tribune of the Ninth Gordian Cohort of Moors, set up [this statue] which he had vowed to the cult of the place.⁶⁰

After an abortive siege in the early years of his rule, Ardashir returned with his son, Shapur. Cassius Dio claimed that Ardashir planned to use Hatra as a ‘base for attacking the Romans’, but apparently his intentions changed, for, in a decisive siege, the city was sacked in 240 and then abandoned.⁶¹ A legend that found its way into the work of al-Tabari suggested that Sanatruq’s daughter, Nadira, had fallen in love with the young Shapur and acted as a fifth column, allowing the Sasanians to capture the city.⁶² Such a story of course raises one’s suspicions, but there is little doubt as to the efforts made by Ardashir and Shapur to subdue Hatra. (Figure 3.1)

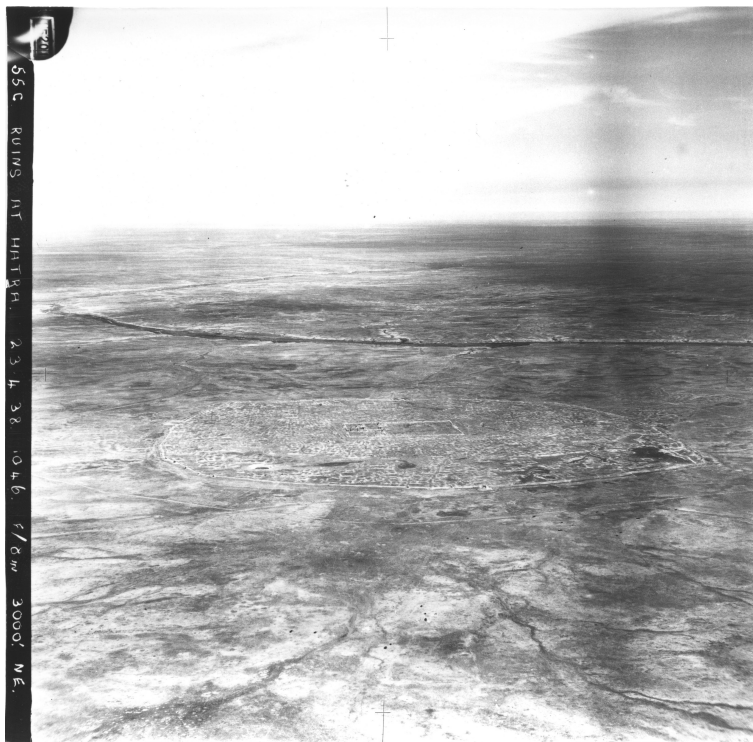


Figure 3.1 Aerial view of Hatra, April 1938. The landscape feature running across the picture is the Wadi Tharthar. To the right of the city lies a district identified as Ardashir’s camp from the siege of 240, while around the city walls can just be seen what is most likely a circumvallation from the Sasanian siege. Sir Aurel Stein Collection (ASA/3/198). Courtesy of the British Academy.

The siege-works are the most extensive of any from Near Eastern antiquity, featuring twenty-four kilometres of circumvallation and ditches, numerous contravallations to protect the attacking army, and a large camp ringed by a double wall.⁶³ Stefan Hauser has dated the fall of the city to sometime between April 12, 240 and April 1, 241.⁶⁴

After Hatra was sacked, the district around the city known as ‘Arabia’ followed, appearing in the list of regions under Shapur’s control on the *SKZ*. Sasanian monarchs now looked southwards, apparently seeking to continue Parthian policy in the Gulf and along the eastern coast of the Arabian Peninsula.⁶⁵ The Sasanian monarchy’s Roman rivals, on the other hand, faced endemic instability during the Third Century Crisis and had few opportunities to pursue a similar course of action. It is notable that the port of Berenike in Egypt saw a marked decline in commercial activity during this period.⁶⁶

According to the Arab-Islamic and Persian sources, the early Sasanian kings were very interested in the eastern coast of the Peninsula. The area in question included the island of Bahrain and the lands between Kuwait and Qatar, part of the territory of the modern United Arab Emirates, and part of the northern and eastern districts of what is today Oman, including the Musandam Peninsula.⁶⁷ Aside from furthering Parthian policies, Ardashir and his successors may have been trying to secure trade routes that ran through the Gulf. Sasanian *bullae* (impressions of seals used for correspondence) have been found in Sri Lanka, and Sasanian trade routes are thought to have spread as far as China and Malaysia.⁶⁸ Another economic motive may have been the desire to control access to eastern Arabian goods, ensuring their taxation to the benefit of the Persian purse.⁶⁹ One other possibility was the military need to defend the southern approaches to the empire; indeed, numerous stories relate that Shapur II constructed a long ditch or dyke, the *Khandaq Shapur*, to restrain access to Mesopotamia.⁷⁰ Remains of this structure have been identified, stretching for over one hundred kilometres between Najaf and Fallujah, located at the very edge of the productive, irrigated landscape.⁷¹ Finally, influence among the Arab tribes living in the eastern part of the Peninsula may have proven an attractive way to defend against any Roman move to do the same in northwestern Arabia—a move which did eventually come, at the turn of the sixth century. It is often assumed that Persia’s Arab clients, the Nasrids (also known as the Lakhmids), associated with al-Hira, near Najaf, played a role in controlling the Arab tribes of the eastern Peninsula on behalf of the Sasanian kings. Indeed, at the turn of the seventh century AD, the collapse of the Nasrid monarchy was swiftly followed by a devastating incursion into the Sasanian empire by Arab raiders (Chapter 4).⁷²

The historian and Quranic commentator al-Tabari (d. 963) stated that Ardashir defeated the ‘king’ of Bahrain and founded settlements there. Given his name, ‘Sanatruq’ (Sinatrukes), and the second-century links between Parthian control of Bahrain via Characene, this ‘king’ was more likely a Parthian governor.⁷³ Hamza al-Isfahani (d. c. 960) was more graphic in his description of what took place at Bahrain, saying that one of the cities there, Batan Ardashir, derived its name from the fact that ‘its walls were built on the corpses of its inhabitants who had thrown off their allegiance to Ardashir... [the king] made one layer of the walls with bricks and the other with corpses’.⁷⁴

The ninth-century polymath al-Dinawari makes similar claims of territorial gains, but includes Oman and al-Yamama in his list of Ardashir’s conquests. It is not clear which of these ideas is to be preferred.⁷⁵ The eighth-century *History of Armenia* of Moses of Khorene lists Bahrain (‘Mashmahig’) in a list of satrapies of the late Sasanian period, although Ibn Qutayba (d. 889) suggests that Bahrain was managed from al-Hira.⁷⁶ In a similar vein the geographer Yaqut (1179–1229) reports that Ardashir established Azd, an important tribal group in South Arabia, at al-Shihr (not al-Shihr in Hadramawt, on the southern coast of

modern Yemen, but rather a site on the Musandam Peninsula).⁷⁷ Other, vague claims for the conquest of Oman, known as ‘Mazun’ in pre-Islamic times, are made by al-Dinawari and a text known as the *Nihayat al-Arab*.⁷⁸ Mazun is listed in the *SKZ* as an area under the control of Shapur I, and also appears as a satrapy in the *History of Armenia*; together with Mashmahig, Mazun was represented at the synod at Ctesiphon in 410,⁷⁹ and representatives of Mazun are found at church councils throughout the fifth and sixth centuries.⁸⁰ Mashmahig does not appear on the *SKZ*, but this may be because it was subsumed under Mazun or was included in the region of Fars in Persia.⁸¹

Despite this profusion of literary evidence, archaeological confirmation of Sasanian interest in the eastern Peninsula is not nearly as forthcoming. In the view of Derek Kennet, the lack of evidence in the face of the more effusive literary coverage in the early medieval literary sources may have inadvertently led to archaeologists ‘finding evidence’ to fill the apparent vacuum. Indeed, while numerous sites in eastern Arabia have been identified as ‘Sasanian’ through ceramics, coins, or other material finds that are Sasanian in origin or character, Kennet’s detailed re-examination of sites in the Bahrain-Oman region, principally concentrated around Bahrain itself and the Musandam Peninsula, shows that there is very little proof for the sort of occupation implied by the literary sources⁸² (Figure 3.2).

In light of the sparse archaeological finds, Kennet and others have therefore questioned the idea that the Gulf became a ‘Sasanian Lake’.⁸³ Potts, for example, has argued that the later ‘memories’ of Sasanian exploits found in the Arab-Islamic and Persian traditions might more accurately reflect an older Parthian claim on Mazun, instead of a contemporary Sasanian



Figure 3.2 Eastern Arabia, showing some of the sites associated with the Sasanians in late antiquity. Illustration by the author.

reality. Mazun, as he points out, rounds out the list of Shapur's possessions in the Parthian text of the *SKZ*. As inheritors of the Parthian empire, Ardashir and his son Shapur could therefore claim Mazun as theirs by conquest without actually engaging in an armed incursion.⁸⁴ Kennet also raises the similar problem of whether the apparently discrete territories of Mazun and Bahrain that appear in the Arab-Islamic tradition should more accurately be seen as a reflection of Islamic-era organisation, contemporary to writers of that period.⁸⁵ Similar questions have been asked about the literary accounts for the expansion of the Church of the East along the coast, noting that much of the archaeological evidence for some of the various churches and monasteries actually postdates the seventh century.⁸⁶

Ultimately, the conclusion that Kennet draws from the archaeological evidence is that while eastern Arabia may have been of interest to the kings in Ctesiphon, it was so only very occasionally over the four-century lifespan of the Sasanian empire: the presumed campaigns of Ardashir in the third century, those of Shapur II in the fourth (below), and again under Khusrau I Anushirvan (531–79) in the sixth (Chapter 4). Sasanian control seems to have been indirect at best. Far from being a land 'which has many islands and peoples all about', in the words of Ammianus, the Gulf coast of eastern Arabia was, in Kennet's view, a region in decline in terms of both population and economy following the Hellenistic/Parthian period. The archaeological evidence does not, in his view, support earlier ideas that the Sasanian period was one of economic and agricultural vitality.⁸⁷ Indeed, it has been argued that Ed-Dur and nearby Mleiha, inland, were abandoned rather suddenly in the early Sasanian period (probably by the late third or early fourth century), and at both sites this event was preceded by the concentration of settlement in fortified dwellings, indicating a security crisis in the area; the fortifications were apparently designed to protect 'a local potentate' rather than house a military garrison.⁸⁸ Whether the event that prompted these actions was a Sasanian invasion or something else is uncertain. Further, contemporary with the desertion of these sites was the growth of coastal settlements such as Kush and Jazirat al-Ghanam, both of which were 'characterised by a material culture strongly marked by Sasanian elements' and the latter of which has been identified as a possible Sasanian outpost. Arrowheads and chainmail were found at Kush, so it is possible that this site, as well, had a military purpose, although the Sasanian-period tower constructed at Kush appears to have been built by an individual without great access to resources—a local functionary, again, rather than a Sasanian military commander.⁸⁹ It is possible that the abandonment of existing settlements and the settlement of new ones, oriented towards the Gulf, can be connected with Sasanian efforts that focused their attention eastwards to their maritime trade with Sri Lanka and further afield and whose character (especially in the case of sites on islands, rather than the mainland) was rather different.⁹⁰

Not everyone agrees with what might be called the 'minimalist' view on Sasanian eastern Arabia.⁹¹ Craig Morley, for example, suggests that the sporadic Sasanian interest in eastern Arabia was a product of the evolution of the Persian state, which generated shifting priorities, rather than a reflection of indifference.⁹² Elsewhere Kennet's thesis has been vigorously questioned by Paul Yule.⁹³ Taking a different approach, Michel Mouton and Julien Cuny have suggested that the spread of Sasanian influence into Oman actually coincided with a return to nomadism by the inhabitants of sites such as Mleiha and Ed-Dur. If such a change in settlement patterns took place, it may have misled archaeologists into interpreting the fourth century and onwards as a period of decline, when what was in fact happening was a significant shift in settlement patterns.⁹⁴ A recent find that asks even more questions is the discovery in 2012 of the late Sasanian fort at Fulayj, south and inland of Sohar—a location that yielded

ample evidence of a Sasanian-period presence—which can be dated to the fifth through seventh centuries.⁹⁵ The fort may have fulfilled a number of functions, including acting as a staging post and managing access between the coast and the interior. An intriguing suggestion is made by the fort's excavators by linking the site with cairn burials found in isolation (that is, not in a settlement) inland. The burials, which are judged to be 'all that remains of nomadic Arab tribes who occupied the interior', sometimes include Sasanian artefacts such as seals, coins, and ceramics. The fort at Fulayj may therefore be connected with these tribes, in order to 'manage the relationship' between Sasanian agents and the (nomadic?) inhabitants of nearby areas.⁹⁶

Whatever the precise nature of Shapur's claim on Mazun in the *SKZ*, it was made on the edges of a turbulent time in the geopolitical map of Arabia. A remarkable inscription discovered at Jabal Riyam, some fifty miles north of Sanaa, commemorates a Sabaeen-era embassy which can be dated to some point between 223 and 300 (and perhaps, more specifically, to between c. 260–80). The authors of the text are not clearly recorded, but they describe a wide-ranging mission undertaken on behalf of several princes of the Sabaeen nobility that reached a number of areas in 'the land of the North', a vague categorisation that seems to incorporate the districts north of Saba and right through *Arabia Deserta* into the lands of the Roman and Persian empires. The text reveals a detailed understanding of the political geography of the Middle East (Figure 3.3).

Saba, Himyar, and Hadramawt made up the three principal kingdoms of South Arabia; to the west lay the kingdom of Aksum in Ethiopia, which had recently invaded South Arabia, only to be beaten off;⁹⁷ far to the north lay Rome and Persia, together with regions that lay under imperial control or influence, such as 'Nabat' (Nabataea), Tadmor (Palmyra), and the 'land of Tanukh', the South Arabian name for al-Hira in Iraq.⁹⁸ *Arabia Deserta* was populated by a number of tribes or groups of tribes that include Maadd, Ghassan, Nizar, and Tayy, all of whom would appear at some point on inscriptions and in literary texts in the period between the fourth and sixth centuries.⁹⁹

The apparent stability of this political order captured in the snapshot from Jabal Riyam did not last. Under its leaders Yasirum Yuhanim (c. 265–87) and his son Shammar Yuharish (c. 286–311), Himyar conquered Saba between 275 and 300 and then, in about 300, subjugated Hadramawt. The kingdoms of Main and Qataban had long since lost their independence, and Himyar's aggressive actions now unified the states of South Arabia into a single entity.¹⁰⁰ The rulers of Himyar adopted a specific political formula to express their rule, styling themselves as 'kings of Saba, of dhu-Raydan [Himyar], of Hadramawt, and of Yamnat [the South]', and adopted a unified dating methodology, the Himyarite era, and a single language, Sabaic, rendered in the South Arabian script.¹⁰¹ Before long, Himyarite armies were headed north into *Arabia Deserta*, while its diplomats set their gaze even further afield.

During Shammar's reign, two embassies were dispatched to Persia. They are described on a thanksgiving dedication to the god Almaqah at the Great Temple at Marib (the Awam temple, to be distinguished from the nearby Barran temple, also dedicated to Almaqah), the most important cult centre in South Arabia.¹⁰² The dedication, dated to 310, was made by a Sabaeen aristocrat entrusted with the mission.¹⁰³ One embassy reached Ctesiphon, while another was sent to 'the land of Tanukh', that is, al-Hira. Given the range of dates provided by Shammar's rule, the recipient of these embassies could have been Bahram II, Narseh (293–302), Hormizd II (302–309), or Shapur II (309–79).¹⁰⁴ Bruno Overlaet has argued that relief IV at Bishapur, showing Bahram II receiving an embassy with camels, is a record of these embassies.¹⁰⁵ On the other hand, Potts has argued that the embassies were sent in

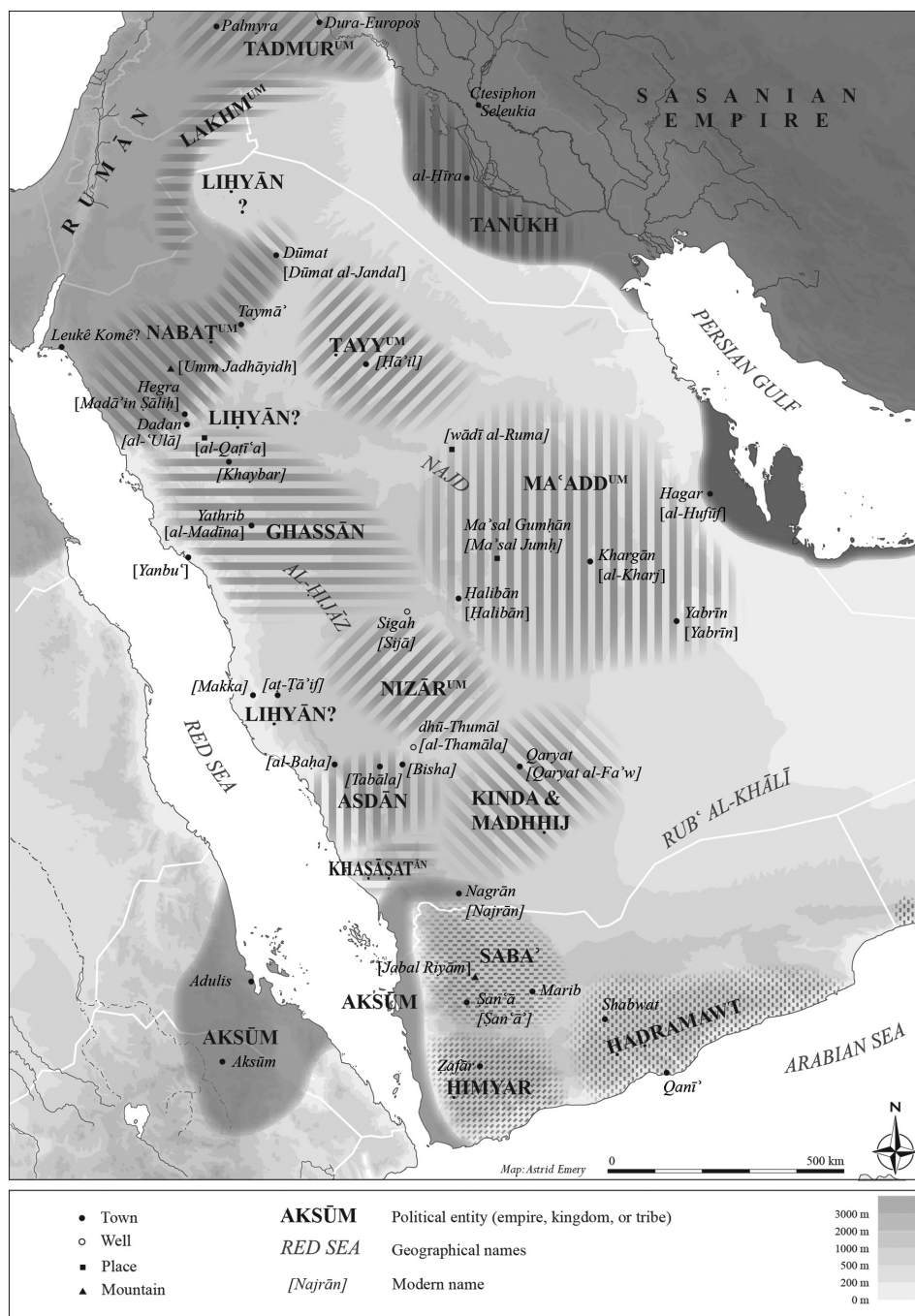


Figure 3.3 A political map of Arabia and the southern Middle East showing the tribes and kingdoms mentioned in inscription Jabal Riyam 2006-17. © A. Emery & J. Schiettecatte, 2015.

response to the accession of Shapur II in 309. Potts bases his hypothesis on al-Tabari's statement that the Sasanian court broadcast the news of the royal accession 'to the farthest lands', and that on receipt of this information, the Himyarite king responded, establishing diplomatic ties with Ctesiphon.¹⁰⁶ According to the historian al-Thaalabi, Shapur II's later campaigns against marauding Arabs in the eastern part of, and the interior of, the Peninsula—so violent that they earned him the grim nickname the 'piercer' or 'separator' of shoulders—were reined in just short of entering Himyarite territory. This was, al-Thaalabi says, because the kings there had become his 'clients', a reflection of the favourable relations between Himyar and Persia brought about by the earlier embassies.¹⁰⁷ Intriguingly, the Persians were not the only recipients of Himyarite embassies; another text from the Great Temple at Marib records a mission to 'Caesar king of the North', dating, apparently, to 311.¹⁰⁸

In the fourth century, as the Roman empire entered another period of civil war—this time between Constantine and his rivals—Himyarite armies were sent north at the behest of king Tharan Yuhanim (c. 324–c. 375), eventually reaching as far as the Hijaz desert and the Najd in the heart of *Arabia Deserta*.¹⁰⁹ Although Tharan Yuhanim led two of them himself, these campaigns were directed in the most part by the dhu-Yazan, princes of a large number of 'communes'—that is, the settled tribes—of Hadramawt. For military manpower, the dhu-Yazan recruited Himyar's Arab allies, including Kinda, Murad, and Madhhij. The latter,¹¹⁰ and probably Murad,¹¹¹ were under the control of Kinda, which usually appears first in lists of Arab allies in Himyarite royal inscriptions.¹¹² (Notably, the Himyarite kings never refer to themselves as 'Arabs' on their inscriptions, reserving the title for the tribes under their control). Kinda, indeed, had a long history in South Arabia, first appearing on a third-century inscription at Qaryat al-Faw, three hundred kilometres northeast of Najran. Excavations there have revealed a small city together with temples, a necropolis, and other features that indicated Kinda's local power.¹¹³ (Excavations at Qaryat al-Faw also revealed artworks and statues with features common to the Graeco-Roman Middle East, showing the extent to which the culture of Hellenism had penetrated Arabia).¹¹⁴ Inscriptions from the Great Temple at Marib record Sabaeen expeditions against Kinda, resulting in the capture and replacement of the Kindite leader, perhaps in response to Kinda's interference in the trade routes that led northwards to the Mediterranean.¹¹⁵ Later, as Himyar became the dominant force in South Arabian politics, Kinda came under Himyarite control.¹¹⁶

The campaigns of the dhu-Yazan and their Kinda and other Arab allies in *Arabia Deserta* were recorded in meticulous detail on a remarkable inscription, dated to AD 360, that was discovered at Abadan, northwest of Aden, a regional centre for the dhu-Yazan. Twelve separate campaigns are listed (Figure 3.4), describing the makeup of the expeditions, their targets, the heroic deeds of the dhu-Yazan, and the plunder and booty seized, while other parts of the lengthy text commemorate the agricultural improvements made at Abadan, including to its irrigation works.¹¹⁷ Several of the expeditions reached much further into the interior of the Peninsula than hitherto achieved by the kings of Himyar; the eighth campaign, for example, penetrated as far as al-Kharj, not far to the south-east of modern Riyadh, while the twelfth was directed against the central Arabian grouping of Maadd, a name referring to 'amorphous, far-ranging collectivities in central and western Arabia', who were often outside of, or at the limits of, the imperial alliance networks that crisscrossed the Middle East.¹¹⁸ Maadd is also mentioned in the Jabal Riyam inscription and appears regularly in the epigraphic and literary record between the fourth and sixth centuries. Whatever its precise nature, its position in central Arabia made it an object of constant diplomatic and political intrigue.¹¹⁹

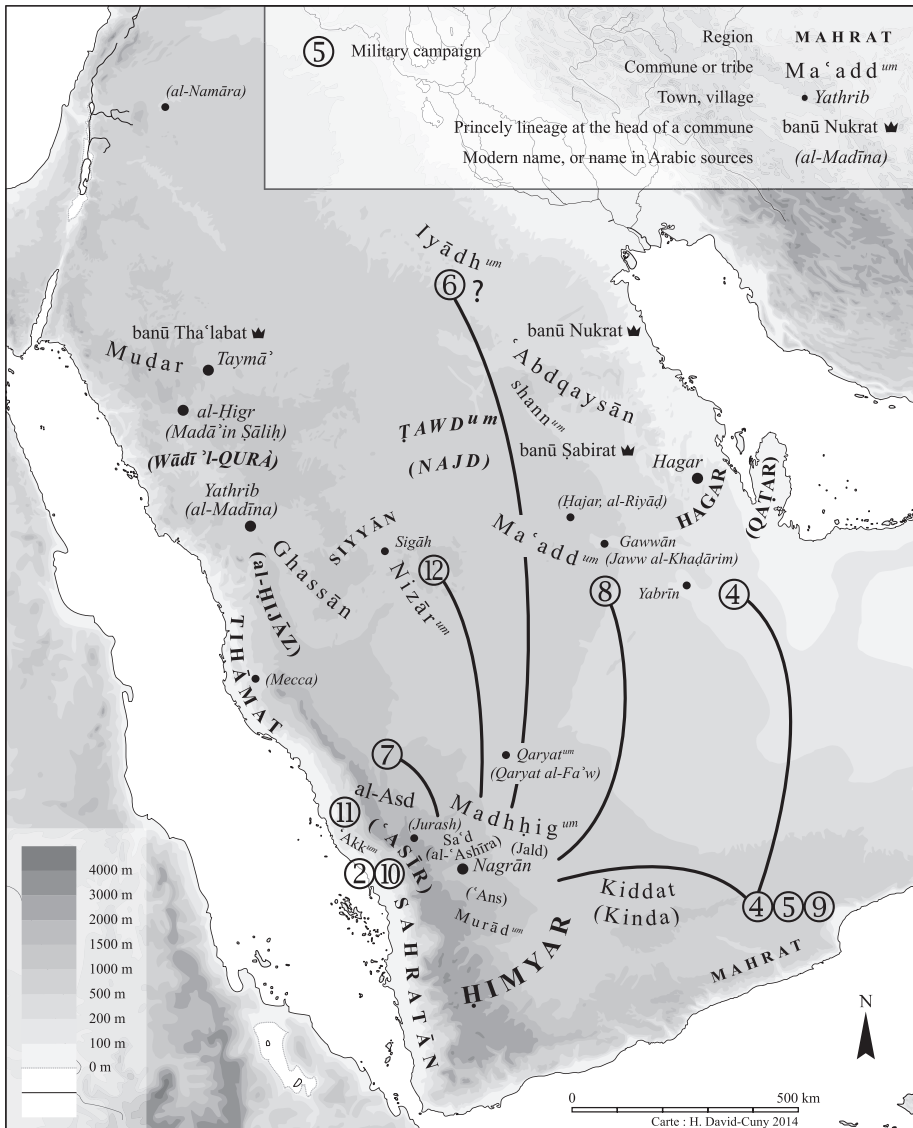


Figure 3.4 The campaigns commemorated on the inscription from Abadan. Illustration by H. David-Cuny; amended by Carla Russo. Reproduced with the kind permission of Dr Christian Julien Robin.

Mara al-Qays: a late antique king at the edge of the Roman empire

While Himyar's armies were campaigning in *Arabia Deserta*, an Arab king named Mara al-Qays (sometimes referred to as Imru al-Qays) sent an expedition to Najran. The source for his career is a truly remarkable funerary inscription discovered by the explorers René Dussaud and Frédéric Macler near the Roman fort at al-Namara in southern Syria in 1901.¹²⁰

This inscription raises a number of important points and poses some difficult questions. First, it suggests that there was a degree of pushback to Himyarite expansionism by parties outside the Peninsula. Although it is not clearly stated in the text, it is plausible to see a military campaign against the city of Najran as a response to Shammar's move into *Arabia Deserta*, particularly as Mara al-Qays refers to war with Madhhij, who were, via Kinda, clients of Himyar. That the inscription was found close to a Roman military installation in Syria suggests that Mara al-Qays may have been a Roman ally at some point, and perhaps carried out the Najran campaign on behalf of the Roman emperor, Constantine. Indeed, Yuzo Shitomi suggested in 1997 that the twin embassies to Persia examined above should be seen as an attempt to gain additional support from Ctesiphon to fend off Mara al-Qays.¹²⁵ At al-Namara, to the north of the Roman fort, lie hundreds of graves of uncertain date, and in a fascinating article Michael Macdonald has suggested that the rather odd placement of Mara al-Qays' elaborate 'provincial' tomb in the middle of nowhere at al-Namara may have been a result of his nearby death in battle, fighting for the Romans.¹²⁶ Maurice Sartre, among the very last to visit the site before the civil war in Syria made further archaeological work in the country impossible, has recently provided a detailed examination of the inscriptions at al-Namara which reveal a rich tableau of Roman soldiers and local villagers who left their mark there.¹²⁷

Just as he may have been a Roman ally, it is quite possible that Mara al-Qays was, in fact, a Persian ally. The inscription tells the reader that Mara al-Qays was 'son of *mrw* [Amr]', and, via some genealogical alchemy, some have connected the king with one 'Amru king of the Lahmids', mentioned as a Persian client in paragraph 92 of a Middle Persian and Parthian inscription from Paikuli in Kurdistan, dated to the reign of Narseh.¹²⁸ A figure who may also be the same individual is known from a Manichean text, which mentions a certain 'Amaro, the king of the sons of Lahim'.¹²⁹ (The 'land of Lakhm' also appears on the Jabal Riyam inscription, discussed above). Al-Tabari mentions a king of al-Hira named Imru al-Qays, whom, he claims, was the son of one Amr. Was Mara al-Qays al-Tabari's Imru al-Qays, king of al-Hira? It is possible, but there is no real evidence that would clinch such an identification.¹³⁰ Interestingly, Christian Robin has linked the campaigns of the dhu-Yazan (above) with the raids of Mara al-Qays, suggesting that the former were intended to intimidate Persia's Arab allies—thus placing the king from al-Namara firmly in the Persian camp.¹³¹

There is also the question of group or 'ethnic' identity in the inscription (what could also, if anachronistically, be labelled 'national identity'), one of the most controversial elements of the text. Despite the attractive prospect of visualising Mara al-Qays as *king of all the Arabs*, there is no basis for this, either in the text itself or in the political or cultural history of the early fourth-century Middle East, and none of the arguments that have proposed this theory hold up to scrutiny.¹³² A more useful way to assess the value of the inscription is to interpret it in light of the changing world in which Arab leaders now found themselves—a world of competition and détente involving Rome, Persia, and Himyar; a world which assigned a new premium to the actions and loyalties of those in and around the Arabian Peninsula, as well as further afield in Aksum, the Caucasus, and Armenia. The inscription from al-Namara suggests that Rome and Persia played a role in underwriting the political authority of Mara al-Qays and his sons, and the Roman imperial 'angle' to his success is neatly encapsulated in the location of the find, close to a line of communication (although perhaps not a Roman road, as once thought) and, visually, in the use of the very Roman *tabula ansata* which frames the inscription. The tomb also featured elaborately carved capitals, one of which was found by Dussaud and Macler.¹³³ At the same time, al-Namara lay in the barren basalt-strewn countryside at the very edge of Roman settlement in Syria, and the Roman identification

provided by the *tabula ansata* is offset by the choice to write the inscription in Arabic—an act which would have marked the king's epitaph out as distinctive even if Mara al-Qays had been entombed in a village or town of Roman Arabia (Figure 3.6). Mara al-Qays thus appears as something of a hybrid character, utilising the different cultural and political cues available to him and to those who established his epitaph.

Whereas there is no precedent for a pan-Arab king in the fourth-century Middle East, there *is* a precedent for this kind of 'hybrid' figure in the Roman world—one that emerged as frontiers became more porous and Roman agents and officials came into contact with non-Roman peoples. In the Roman west, particularly in the fourth and fifth centuries, Germanic warlords, originally from the north banks of the Rhine and Danube, translated imperial patronage into political clout and eventually positioned themselves as credible alternatives to Roman rule following the collapse of the western empire in the late fifth century. Some Germanic groups, such as the Goths, became particularly associated with the Roman empire as *foederati*—allies, subordinated to the state, who received a subsidy known in Latin as the *annona*, as well as gifts or other inducements in return for military service.¹³⁴ The system was also an entry point into more formal kinds of service and as noted in Chapter 1, the Franks, for example, went on to make up a sizeable clique in the late Roman officer corps.¹³⁵ For such people and for their contemporaries, credibility was won and preserved by taking familiar elements of Roman political life—titles, dress, material culture, and other visual cues, such as monumental inscriptions, as well as Roman laws and customs—and combining these with important facets of Germanic rule, such as a 'face-to-face' style of rule and success on the battlefield as warlords leading their troops. Arguably the most famous of these men was the half-Vandal Stilicho, who made his career as the commander in chief of Roman forces for the emperor Honorius, before falling afoul of a palace plot carried out by those who resented his 'barbarian' Germanic background.¹³⁶

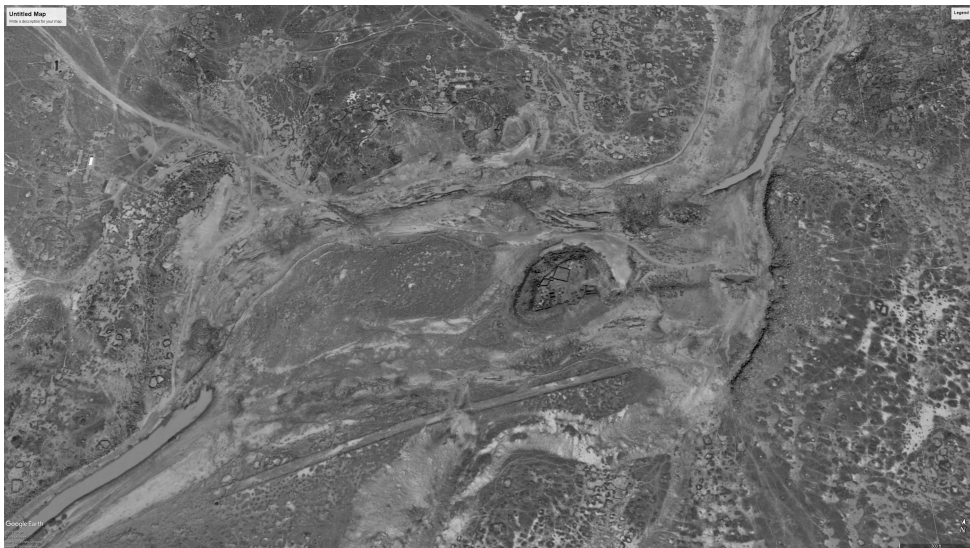


Figure 3.6 Google Earth Pro image of al-Namara, taken in September 2015. The Roman installation occupies the left side of the island, in a trapezoid shape. Note the protected ramp leading from the island to the east and a Roman well. Image © 2019 CNES/Airbus, © 2019 DigitalGlobe, © 2018 Google, © 2018 Orion-Me.

Markers of hybridity in the late antique western Roman world are often preserved through grave goods and through the location and presentation of funerary monuments. The sixth-century mausoleum of the Ostrogothic king Theoderic in Ravenna, for example, represents a striking amalgam of Augustan influence and the fluid imagery of the steppe, reflected in the way that the structure resembled a *yurt*. Theoderic himself is reported in a weak moment to have muttered ‘a poor Roman plays the Goth, a rich Goth the Roman’, hinting at the malleability of Romano-Germanic identities at the time.¹³⁷ In late antique North Africa, the funerary inscription of one Masuna (AD 508), written in Latin and from Altava in the province of Mauretania Caesariensis, styled him as ‘king [*rex*] of the Moorish people and the Roman people’, before reeling off a string of Roman administrative titles such as *procurator* and *prefect*.¹³⁸ His near contemporary, Masties, *dux* and *imperator*, ‘never betrayed, nor broke the faith, neither with the Romans, nor with the Moors’.¹³⁹ (Both *rex* and *dux* were terms commonly used in Latin literature to refer to local or tribal rulers; see Chapter 5.) In North Africa, too, can be found the thirteen mysterious *djedars*, imposing funerary monuments that consisted of large platforms topped by a pyramid, found at the edge of the steppe lands but astride main Roman lines of communication. The interiors of some featured rooms that were apparently intended for incubation, a North African burial practice; some of the *djedars* display partially legible Latin inscriptions and in one (*djedar* F) the remnants of Christian wall paintings can still be seen. These monuments can be read as ‘a conscious reinvention of a local expression of power’, one that combined a familiarity with expressions of Roman political authority and the architectural conventions of the Sahara.¹⁴⁰ Other examples of this sort of hybridity include those from late antique Libya, at Ghirza, where local tombs can be found with carvings in relief displaying men sitting on the cross-shaped chairs usually associated with Roman senatorial authority; at nearby Bir ed-Dreder, other tombs feature inscriptions referring to men with Roman and Libyan names, with some bearing Roman titles and the common name of Flavius, taken conspicuously by non-Romans in late antiquity to honour the Flavian dynasty of Constantine.¹⁴¹ There are many other examples, most famous of all, the grave of Childeric, the father of Clovis, the future king of the Franks. Childeric took with him for the afterlife a signet ring inscribed in Latin, portraying him wearing Roman military clothing, together with a Frankish axe and a gold arm-ring of the sort found in other Germanic graves and associated with personal martial prowess. Three pits containing horse skeletons were found nearby, and it is possible that this Germanic grave custom was connected with Childeric’s burial.¹⁴² This kind of blending of identities, particularly on funerary epitaphs or in grave goods, is common in the late antique Roman world. The Sasanian material goods discovered in cairn burials found inland from Fulayj, discussed earlier in this chapter, and thought by the fort’s excavators to represent a nomadic culture that interacted with Sasanian authorities through the agency of the nearby fort, might offer an eastern parallel.

With these ideas in mind, it is possible to see Mara al-Qays not as a *king of all the Arabs*, but instead as a figure with a great deal in common with Theoderic, Masuna, or the builders of the *djedars* in North Africa. He was an ‘outsider product’ of the late Roman world, specifically of the peculiarities that resulted from the removal of the middle ground between the periphery and the centre. At the same time, the conscious choice to use the Arabic language for the inscription stands as a decisive marker of the growing prominence of Arabic speakers at the edges of the Roman empire, and ensured that Mara al-Qays’ linguistic community was prominently displayed on his epitaph. It is also an important fact that the inscription from al-Namara is no graffito carved onto a rock in the desert. Visitors to the Louvre today can admire a graceful yet imposing carved piece of stonework that would cause anyone to pause and gaze at it, whether or not they could read the text. There is nothing like this from the

second or third centuries: and so, for the first time, we have an Arabic monumental inscription, within the Roman empire, which uses references to the Great Powers in an overt and impressive way to bolster the clout of an Arab leader. Imperial alliance is not mentioned to show deference or subjugation to imperial power; quite the opposite. The links between Mara al-Qays and his family on the one hand, and Rome and Persia on the other, were an integral part of what made him worthy of commemoration.

‘So much for this dangerous tribe’

As noted in Chapter 2, the Romans and Persians had a long history of using friendly kings and petty leaders as clients—men and women who provided a cost-effective way of managing territory. In return for political support, financing, and other perks, a Herod or a local king, intimately familiar with his region and possessing the means to patrol it, collect taxes, and offer military assistance when needed, offered an efficient alternative to conquest and occupation. After all, this was the model that had provided the original basis for Roman rule in the east after Pompey’s settlement. With the later disappearance of those ‘original’ client kingdoms by the beginning of the third century, this void was filled by others. The inscription of Mara al-Qays is an early signifier of the appearance of Arab kings with links to imperial service.

During the reigns of Constantius II (337–61) and Julian (361–63) Rome found itself once again at war with Persia. Constantius appears to have established a number of Arab tribes as *foederati* (known, in Greek texts, as *hypospondoi*). In c. 338, Constantius settled a dispute with ‘marauding Arabs’ through ‘embassies’, by which they were let loose upon the Persians.¹⁴³ By the time of Julian, it seems that Arab auxiliary troops were regularly taking part in Roman campaigns in the east. For details of this period we are largely reliant on the superb *History* of the Roman military officer Ammianus Marcellinus, who served on the staff of Ursicinus, one of the leading Roman generals in the Persian war, and who was an eyewitness to much of what he described. The *History* is also noteworthy for its insights into the political changes that had taken place in the lands between Rome and Persia: in a haunting image, Ammianus records Roman troops hunting for deer in the deserted streets of Dura Europos,¹⁴⁴ and later, on the long retreat from Persia, he passed Hatra, ‘an old city lying in the midst of a desert and long since abandoned’.¹⁴⁵

Ammianus records that in March of 363, after Julian had reached the city of Callinicum (modern Raqqa, in Syria):

There the princes of the Saracen nations as suppliants on bended knees presented him with a golden crown and did obeisance to him as lord of the world and of its peoples; and they were gladly received, since they were adapted for guerrilla warfare.¹⁴⁶

Despite Julian’s favourable view of their fighting qualities, the Arab *foederati* soon found their *annona* withdrawn. Angry, a mob of Arab troops surrounded a group of Roman soldiers; as tempers flared and swords were drawn, a Roman patrol intervened. Ammianus says that:

we found these Saracens hostile for the reason that they had been prevented by Julian’s order from receiving pay and numerous gifts, as in times past, and when they complained to him, had received the simple reply that a warlike and watchful emperor had steel, and not gold.¹⁴⁷

So important was the *annona* for cementing trust between the two parties that Libanius, the former tutor of Julian, suggested that its abrupt cessation led an angry Arab soldier to throw the spear that later killed the emperor on the battlefield.¹⁴⁸

Ammianus is spartan in his descriptions and characterisation of Arab *foederati*, but offers a few interesting facts about one of the Arab leaders that Julian encountered. This man was one ‘Malechus’, apparently a Latinisation of the Arabic word *malik*, meaning ‘king’, whom Ammianus calls Podosaces, ‘phylarch of the Assanitic Saracens’. In a familiar turn of phrase, he appears in the text as ‘a notorious brigand, who with every kind of cruelty had long raided our territories’.¹⁴⁹ There are several points of interest here. First, there is no indication that Podosaces was king of anything in particular in the manner of Herod or Aretas of Nabataea. On the contrary, the title of king (or *malik*) appears with some frequency in reference to non-Roman elites, similar to *rex* (above). There is seldom any indication of royal pedigree, or a kingdom under royal control; it is a title designed for local consumption.

Secondly, the use of the word ‘Assanitic’—which appears to hint at a lineage or tribal background—is also of interest. The discussion of such context or names beyond immediate family members is extremely rare in both epigraphic and textual sources. For example, hardly ever is an individual mentioned with reference to his or her tribal affiliation; rather, authors used ‘son of’, or a marker of imperial affiliation such as ‘Persian Arab’ or ‘Roman Arab’. Here, it is possible that the word ‘Assanitic’ is a reference to the tribe of Ghassan, well known to the Arab-Islamic tradition and, in antiquity, also known from a number of inscriptions. One of the earliest is a Sabaic text from Marib, dated to between 235 and 260 through the mention of the Sabaeen king Ilisharah Yahdub, which identifies Ghassan as a commune.¹⁵⁰ The ‘land of Ghassan’ also appears as one of the destinations of the Sabaeen diplomatic mission recorded on the Jabal Riyam inscription.¹⁵¹

An undated graffito in Aramaic from the region of al-Ula (near Hegra) mentions a ‘Zaydmanat king of Ghassan’, while the name Ghassan appears again on the Abadan inscription of the dhu-Yazan, where its territory is delineated from that of Nizar by the ‘waters of the well [of] Sigah’.¹⁵² Ghassan is also mentioned by both Ptolemy and Pliny.¹⁵³ A close examination of these texts has led Christian Robin to identify the territory of Ghassan in the western part of the Peninsula, most likely in the Hijaz (where al-Ula is located) in the third and fourth centuries AD. It has further been suggested that the way that ‘Assanitic’ was written by Ammianus is similar to the way that ‘Ghassan’ is written on the Aramaic graffito found near al-Ula. While the latter is undated, Robin has suggested a third or fourth century date on the basis of the writing style, which would agree broadly with the date of Ammianus’ text. Robin also suggests that the name ‘Podosaces’ is possibly a Latin rendering of the Persian ‘Fadawkas’, which, if Podosaces was in (intermittent?) Persian service, would at least explain his appearance in the Euphrates valley during the Roman campaign against the Persians.¹⁵⁴

A third point of interest is Ammianus’ use of the term ‘Saracen’. In book 22 of his *History*, Ammianus had commented to the reader that the ‘Scenitic Arabs’—that is, the *scenitae* or ‘tent-dwellers’—were now called ‘Saracens’. He offers no explanation for this shift in terminology, even though he went into lurid detail about the lifestyle and ways of the Saracens in book 14. There, after locating the Saracens in a geographical region from Assyria to the River Nile, he went on to lambast their inability to engage in ‘civilised’ pursuits such as wine-drinking and living a settled existence, and takes a particularly dim view of their sexual practices. This passage, which recalls earlier Graeco-Roman ethnographic stereotyping of barbarians, ends with a curt dismissal: ‘so much for this dangerous tribe’.¹⁵⁵

What should be made of the new term for Arabs of the desert, ‘Saracens’? Ammianus himself provides few clues. Although he says that he had discussed Arabs in more detail in the

part of his history covering the reign of Marcus Aurelius, as well as in other chapters, none of these parts of his manuscript have come down to us intact. In those parts that have survived, Ammianus apparently assumed that the reason for the change was common knowledge, as he makes no effort to explain it. Yet even though Ammianus was not the earliest writer to use the term Saracen—the geographer Ptolemy had mentioned both *Sarakenoi* and a place that he called *Sarakēnē*—it was Ammianus, not Ptolemy, who made the explicit link between Saracens and Arab *scenitae*.¹⁵⁶ As a result, a great deal of effort has been expended in trying to untangle this problem. Some of the possibilities advanced include:

- the popular association between Ishmael and the Arabs, which included Sarah, whence ‘Saracen’¹⁵⁷
- the Arabic word for east (*sharq*), or thief (*sariq*), calling to mind the location(s) where the *scenitae* were thought to live, and the sort of lifestyle they were believed to follow¹⁵⁸
- the Aramaic word for empty (*s^eraq*), evoking the desert¹⁵⁹
- the Aramaic word for federation (*srkt*), referring to groups of nomadic Arabs¹⁶⁰

A further layer of intrigue was added by the near-contemporary appearance of the term *tayyaye*, used in Syriac texts to refer to Arabs of the desert.¹⁶¹ The term is also used in the *Synodicon Orientale*, the acts of the Church of the East, to refer to bishops ministering to Arab communities, such as bishop Symeon of the *hirta d’tayyaye*, ‘of the camp of the *tayyaye*’, at the synod of Dadisho in 424.¹⁶² Some of the possibilities proposed for this term include:

- a reference to the name of a tribe, Tayy¹⁶³
- a nod to the Syriac word for error (*toyay*)¹⁶⁴

None of these options are particularly convincing. The most helpful solution has been proposed by Michael Macdonald. In his view, the creation of the province of Arabia in AD 106 made anyone who lived in the province an ‘Arab’, at least in the bureaucratic sense, and it was therefore appropriate to come up with a new name for those who lived on the ‘outside’—that is, in the steppe and desert, away from the cities and towns of the new province. According to Macdonald, a particular word root in the North Arabian dialect, ‘*s-r-q*’, meaning ‘to migrate to the inner desert’, might be responsible for producing the word ‘Saracen’. Combined with an understandable desire to better classify the different peoples associated with the province of Arabia, it seems likely that the increasing visibility of *scenitae* due to army recruitment and frontier interactions made a new terminology useful. As a result, *Saracenoī*, and thus *tayyaye*, became accepted terms across the literary spectrum for Arabs who lived in the desert.¹⁶⁵ Unless the missing parts of Ammianus’ text turn up, or something else comes to light, it is unlikely that a firmer answer than this to this historical conundrum will ever be found.

Another view of the involvement of Arab troops in the Roman military apparatus is found in the *Notitia Dignitatum*, the list of offices and army units dating from the late fourth/early fifth century.¹⁶⁶ The part of the *Notitia* dealing with the eastern empire records enlisted units (i.e., regular army units rather than *foederati*) that appear to comprise Arab recruits, either in whole or in part.¹⁶⁷ These include, under the authority of *comes* (‘counts’) and *duces* (‘dukes’), senior late Roman military command grades:

- *equites Saraceni indigenae*: a cavalry unit of Saracens, stationed at Betproclis (Furqus), southeast of Emesa, under the command of the *dux Foenicis* (the duke of Phoenice)¹⁶⁸

- *equites Saraceni*: a cavalry unit of Saracens, stationed at Thelsee (perhaps Dumayr, east of Damascus), also under the command of the *dux Foenicis*¹⁶⁹
- *equites Saraceni Thamudeni*: a cavalry unit apparently drawn from the tribe of Thamud (known from the Ruwafa inscriptions) stationed at Scenas Veteranorum (near Heliopolis?) in Egypt under the *comes limitis Aegypti*, ‘the count of the Egyptian frontier’¹⁷⁰
- *equites Thamudeni Illyriciani*: also a cavalry unit apparently drawn from the tribe of Thamud, stationed at Birsama in Palestine under the command of the *dux Palaestinae*, the duke of Palestine.¹⁷¹

The appearance of Arabs in cavalry units is notable and underlines the general perception in ancient sources that they possessed a talent for mobile warfare. Elsewhere the *Notitia* lists camel cavalry, such as the *Ala Antana dromedariorum* in Palestine,¹⁷² and locally raised mounted archers, such as the *equites sagittarii indigenae*.¹⁷³ It is possible that some of these units were also raised with Arab recruits.¹⁷⁴ The *Notitia* also includes references to ‘Arab’ infantry or light cavalry units, such as the *Cohors quinquagenaria Arabum* and the *Ala tertia Arabum*.¹⁷⁵ It is possible that the designation of ‘Arab’ units here is a reference to their point of origin, i.e., the province of Arabia, and not any kind of ‘ethnic’ description.

Saracens were not always allies of the Romans; they could, on occasion, prove to be formidable enemies. The literary record contains numerous references to minor skirmishes, hit-and-run raids, hostage taking, and general disturbances that required the intervention of Roman troops.¹⁷⁶ Such notices have sometimes been used to suggest that there was a ‘nomadic menace’, and the excavation of the impressive and well-preserved Roman fortifications in Jordan, known as the *limes Arabicus*, seemed at first to support this view. Many of the installations were to be found in marginal country, close to the desert, and it therefore seemed reasonable to associate the forts, legionary bases, and watchtowers with the need to suppress Arab raiding. Many years of spirited debate eventually reached the verdict that the ‘nomadic menace’ was overstated, but it is now generally acknowledged that Arab raiding and hostage- or slave-taking constituted a real problem with often significant local impact.¹⁷⁷ While raiding would assume an overtly political dimension in the sixth century (Chapter 4), many Arab raids in this earlier period were probably characterised by harassment and were primarily a nuisance, part of the daily problems faced by Roman field commanders.¹⁷⁸ A record of one such event, for instance, is given by a Latin inscription from Khirbet Umm el-Menara in Jordan:

Vincentius, *Protector* at Basie, seeing that many of the *agrarienses*¹⁷⁹ had been killed by Saracens while obtaining water for their own use, constructed a reservoir for water from the foundations. [He did this] in the consulship of the Most Illustrious Optatus and Paulinus [AD 334].¹⁸⁰

Although there is very little information for it, it seems that Arab raiding was also a problem for the Persians in this period. In the martyr legend of Mar (saint) Qardagh, celebrating a martyr stoned to death in 358/9 and written in Syriac in the Persian empire sometime during the seventh century, one particular section, looking back to the reign of Shapur II, records Arab raids carried out with Roman help around the city of Nisibis.¹⁸¹ Another indication is provided in the Syriac poetry of Isaac of Antioch. In his account of the sack of Beth Hur, near Nisibis (c. 474), the Arabs are characterised as ‘furious wild asses’ who carried out human sacrifice to Uzzai (Aphrodite).¹⁸² Elsewhere, Arab raiding was attributed to hunger. Despite

the floral and literary nature of Isaac's work, drought, famine, or other environmental factors are cited throughout antiquity as causes of Arab raiding. Much later, al-Tabari would say that the desperate raiding of Arabs during the reign of Shapur II was a result of their 'wretched condition and the harshness of their way of life'.¹⁸³

The revolt of Mavia

One of the most famous episodes of violence between Romans and Arabs was the revolt of Queen Mavia. Her rebellion was contemporary to the growing humanitarian and security crisis in the Balkans, that would ultimately lead two-thirds of a crack Roman army and the emperor Valens to their death on the grim battlefield at Adrianople (378). Mavia, also called Mania or Mabilia, was married to an unnamed Arab leader who had enjoyed an alliance with Valens. On the death of her husband, the agreement with the emperor was terminated and Mavia responded in 377 by launching an armed uprising in the eastern provinces, although the exact location is not clear. The revolt showed the efficacy of Arab troops and underscored the importance to the Romans of maintaining stable alliances along the frontier. Mavia enjoyed some impressive early success, in particular by delivering such a shock to the *magister militum per Orientem*, the senior Roman general in the east, that the unfortunate officer needed to be rescued by his subordinate. The early fifth-century ecclesiastical historian Sozomen, one of our main sources for the revolt, noted sourly that 'this war was by no means a contemptible one, although conducted by a woman'.¹⁸⁴

In a neat inversion of the expected outcome of this sort of event, it was the Romans who eventually asked for peace. Their new treaty was cemented both by acceding to Mavia's demand for a bishop (on which see further below) as well as by the marriage between Mavia's daughter and a senior Roman officer, Victor. As a result, the Arab troops and their queen became *hypospondoi* to the Romans.¹⁸⁵ The revolt achieved notoriety for a number of reasons and accounts of it appear in the writings of no fewer than five ancient commentators; indeed, Sozomen said that the event was 'still held in remembrance among the people of the country, and is celebrated in songs by the Saracens'.¹⁸⁶ Later, after the battle at Adrianople, a detachment of Mavia's troops helped to protect the walls of Constantinople from Gothic attack. Curiously, the account provided by Ammianus sensationally relates that one of the Arab soldiers sucked the blood from the neck of a Goth whom he had killed in combat.¹⁸⁷

Along with Semiramis, Cleopatra, the revolt of the Palmyrene queen Zenobia, Boadicea in Britain, and the Kahina in seventh-century North Africa, Mavia's story represents one of the few examples from antiquity of a military action led by a female protagonist.¹⁸⁸ The episode also illustrates the key importance of personal relationships in governing interactions between the Roman state and their Arab allies. At the state level, Roman-Persian treaties, for example, were typically between individuals—the Roman emperor and the Persian king. This kind of thinking was transposed to arrangements at lower levels, and so it was that Mavia's husband had concluded an agreement not with the Roman *empire*, but with the Roman *emperor*. In much the same way that emperors and kings could justify a period of aggression when their opposite number died in office—the invasion of the Persian king Khusrau II in the early seventh century was ostensibly carried out to avenge 'his friend', the Roman emperor Maurice—local treaties could easily unravel in violence when one party died. Mavia's revolt began with a personal act, the expiration of a treaty between her husband and the emperor, and was similarly ended by personal acts: the provision of a bishop for Mavia's people, and the marriage between Mavia's daughter and a senior Roman commander.

The importance of personal relationships assumed even greater prominence as the position of phylarch developed in complexity from being a general term for a ‘tribal leader’ to becoming a more formal sort of office, held typically by an Arab chief, between the late fourth and early/mid-sixth centuries. The phylarch was not only the military commander of his or her forces, on campaign with Roman troops, but also the primary link between the resources of the tribe and those of the state. Funds and material support furnished by the state found their way to the tribe via the phylarch, who was the pivot on which the whole personal arrangement rested. The centrality of interpersonal relationships is underlined in the literary sources by a repeated focus on individual phylarchs with virtually no mention whatsoever of the people whom they led. Even those who were part of the state apparatus, and who had the opportunity to meet and work with Arab phylarchs, practically ignore issues of lineage or broader group membership. Ammianus, as we have seen, furnished few concrete details about Podosaces, and even for a well-connected sixth-century witness like Procopius—historian, one-time secret agent, and secretary to Justinian’s general Belisarius—names of Arab individuals, not peoples, are the norm.

While phylarchs tended to designate Arab chiefs, the style of arrangement that the office represented was not unique to the Roman east. In North Africa, for example, Roman authorities had approached border security and tribal relationships by designating specific tribal leaders as *principes*, ‘chief men’, and used them to maintain the stability of tribal communities in much the same way as phylarchs were used. On occasion, individual Roman officers themselves were appointed as *principes*, although no corollary to this is found in the east.¹⁸⁹ The Roman approach had some unintended consequences. Just as Mara al-Qays’ association with Rome was a mark of his greatness, the patronage of Arab leaders by Roman emperors provided a route for Arab chiefs to win a great deal of political capital. On this basis, and with the financial backing of the state, the Jafnid family would carve out a powerful fiefdom in Roman Syria and Arabia in the sixth century (Chapter 4).

Religious communities

During the reign of Tharan Yuhanim, as Himyarite armies swept into *Arabia Deserta*, a religious revolution was taking place in South Arabia. The Himyarite kings made a definitive break with polytheism and adopted a form of Judaism, which Christian Robin calls ‘Judeo-Monotheism’. Over the course of the fourth century, inscriptions in traditional polytheist temples declined markedly, and by AD 380, pagan and polytheistic content disappeared from Himyarite inscriptions. If pagan worship continued, it did so in private.¹⁹⁰ The reasons for the reform are to be found, perhaps, in a desire for greater spirituality and a more personal approach to religion, combined with the political benefit of imposing unity on the vast areas now under Himyarite control and helping to counter the newly Christian kingdom of Aksum across the Red Sea. Indeed, in the 340s Ezana became the first Aksumite king to adopt Christianity, and as his royal titles show, he laid claim to Saba and Himyar.¹⁹¹ The strengthening of ties between Aksum and Rome that resulted may also have been intended to contain raiding by the Blemmyes and Noubades, which was causing unrest in parts of Roman Egypt.¹⁹²

As noted earlier, there were already communities of Jews in Arabia, but the adoption of a form of Judaism by the kings of the Himyarite state was an unprecedented development. One of the most remarkable aspects of this phenomenon was the decisive break with the past. References to pagan worship vanished, and words derived from Aramaic and Hebrew appeared on inscriptions in their place, written in the South Arabian script and using the

Sabaic language (only two examples of the use of Hebrew in Himyarite inscriptions are known to exist). Instead of their commune, aristocrats asserted their membership of ‘Israel’.¹⁹³ The Great Temple at Marib appears to have received no further visits from the Sabaeen nobility after 380 and may even have been transformed into a synagogue.¹⁹⁴ While the shift in religious belief has often thought to be abrupt, Iwona Gajda has argued recently, on the basis of newly published texts, that it was a slower process than has previously been thought.¹⁹⁵ The shift towards Judeo-Monotheism was in any case formalised under Tharan Yuhanim’s son, Malkikarib Yuhamin, at some point between 380 and 384, and the political focus of the new faith became Zafar, the Himyarite capital, a city that lay nearly 2800 metres above sea level, surrounded by fertile irrigated terraces and possessing significant defensive works that included a four-kilometre rampart.¹⁹⁶ An early inscription from the reign of Malkikarib Yuhamin shows the king celebrating the establishment of a *mikrab*, the term borrowed to designate the location where the new religion was to be practiced.¹⁹⁷ Incredibly, and despite the desperate situation in Yemen, new inscriptions continue to be discovered. In 2017, Sarah Rijziger found several new texts, including one with a call to ‘God of Israel’, an appeal hitherto unknown in Himyarite epigraphy.¹⁹⁸

Robin considers that the Judaism practiced by the kings of Himyar was ‘minimalist’ and not the same as its practise in the Levant, but this development caught the attention of the newly Christian Roman court. The adoption of a form of the Jewish faith raised concerns that Himyar might align with Persia, and during the reign of Constantine’s successor, Constantius II, a somewhat quixotic mission led by one ‘Theophilus the Indian’ was dispatched to Tharan Yuhanim to see if the monarchy could be coaxed into accepting Christianity.¹⁹⁹ Arriving in Zafar at some point between 339 and 344, Theophilus met with little enthusiasm, although he did win the concession that three churches would be built.²⁰⁰

Theophilus’ mission was, in large part, political. If a rival could be brought into the same religious fold, closer ties and the prospect of joint efforts against mutual foes were possible and useful outcomes. For the Romans, profession of the Christian faith presented an important way to solidify the *bona fides* of an individual or a group of people. The revolt of Mavia offers an early and important example and illustrates the difficulty of negotiating between different ‘types’ of Christians in late antiquity. When the Romans began peace overtures towards the queen, her initial demand, according to Sozomen, was for ‘the ordination of a certain man named Moses, who practised philosophy in a neighboring desert, as bishop over her subjects’.²⁰¹ Complications arose when Moses was duly collected by Roman troops and delivered to the patriarch of Alexandria, Lucius, who followed a strain of Christianity known as Arianism. Declared heretical by the Council of Nicaea (325), Arianism was the sect of Christianity favoured by the emperor Valens. For Moses, on the other hand, the patriarch’s ‘sentiments [were] opposed to the faith of Christ, and to all orthodox doctrines concerning the Godhead’.²⁰² Here was a monk who viewed the patriarch and the emperor as heretics, and his own beliefs as orthodox! Eventually the matter was resolved, and Moses played an important role in settling affairs between Mavia and Valens, but the episode shows clearly the crucial importance of a shared religion—and sometimes, a shared sect of that religion—in maintaining peace.

Similar themes are to be found nearly a century later, in the tale of an *émigré* from Persia named Amorkesos (a Hellenisation of the popular name Mara al-Qays/Imru al-Qays) who arrived in Roman territory in 473. Wisely, Amorkesos ensured that he was preceded by a priest named Peter to plead his case. The historian Malchus, from Philadelphia (Amman), tells his readers by way of background that following the war between Theodosius II (408–50) and Yazdegerd I (399–420) and then his successor Bahram V (420–38), the Roman and

Persian leaders had concluded a treaty by which each agreed not to take in refugees from the other. In his account, Malchus adds the detail that this agreement specifically included the ‘Saracen allies of the other if any of them attempted to revolt’.²⁰³ The impetus behind this lay in the very origins of the war itself, triggered by the poor treatment of Roman merchants by the Persians and the latter’s hostile attitude towards Persian Christians, many of whom became refugees. The war itself was short and unremarkable, except for the ecclesiastical historians who covered it; a favourite topic for these writers was the spectacular and inevitable demise of non-believers at the hands of the almighty. In one vignette, a Persian-allied Arab bearing the common name ‘Alamundarus’ (al-Mundhir) boasted that he could capture Antioch, but his arrogance courted disaster as his troops (but not, apparently, Alamundarus himself) threw themselves into the Euphrates in abject terror at the prospect of the advancing Roman army.²⁰⁴

By the time that Amorkesos arrived in Roman territory, the political climate was still febrile. If the emperor Leo (457–74) was to admit the newcomer, a Saracen refugee from Persia, he needed a good reason to do so. He did not need to look far. In addition to using Peter as a bargaining chip, Amorkesos had further strengthened his negotiating position by appropriating the island of Iotabe²⁰⁵ in the Red Sea and taking over its tax collection business, and then went on to seize several other nearby settlements. Malchus says that he was careful only to fight Saracens, rather than Romans, but at Iotabe he threw out the Roman tax collectors and took their affairs for himself. This done, he dispatched Peter to request that his *coup de main* be recognised by Leo with a phylarchate. The deception worked, and an invitation to dine with Leo and his advisers followed, with the emperor ‘pretending that Amorkesos had been persuaded to become a Christian’.²⁰⁶ Malchus is furious at this, arguing not unreasonably that Amorkesos should have been awed by Roman power, rather than the other way around. Whatever the case, Leo probably had little choice and may have capitalised on the well-established belief that shared religious ties paid political dividends to cover up his impotence, given the recent and calamitous disaster that had befallen Roman arms on his watch: his general, Basiliscus, had betrayed a vast Roman expedition to oust the Vandals in North Africa, and the Roman invasion fleet was sunk off Cape Bon in 468.²⁰⁷ The story of Amorkesos is therefore useful not only for its insight into the ability of non-Christians to acquire political capital through a real or pretended adoption of Christianity, but also for the limited Roman ability to manage local events on its southern frontier at this time. For Leo, it was far less effort to accept Amorkesos as phylarch than it was to contest his brazen and precocious actions.

Unsurprisingly, Christian writers took a great deal of interest in the ‘conversion’ of non-Christians and the perceived civilising benefits of such a move. To some extent this was couched in the same sort of language that informed traditional views of barbarians, but this time Christianity offered a new form of redemption. There were different ways in which this could happen. Common themes found in Christian texts, written in Latin, Greek, or Syriac, include the healing of dreadful illnesses through the interventions of holy men; the sloughing of old identities and the assumption of new ones; and tales of salvation. One frequent commentator on the customs of the Saracens was St Jerome (347–419), who viewed Arabs as tent-dwellers who, unsurprisingly, derived their sustenance from milk and meat—common stereotypes in ancient literature.²⁰⁸ In Jerome’s hagiography of St Malchus, the hapless saint was travelling on the road between Beroea (Aleppo) and Edessa, when dramatic events unfolded:

There were in my company men, women, old people, the young, the very small, about seventy in total. Suddenly, Ishmaelites on horses and camels assaulted us, with

their locks of hair bound, their bodies half-naked, cloaks flowing out behind; quivers were hanging from their shoulders, and they brandished unstrung bows and carried long spears. For they had not come to fight, but to plunder. We were seized, scattered, and taken in different directions. I, meanwhile, at a late hour, repenting of my plan, and far from being the possessor of my inheritance, came to be assigned with another sufferer, a woman, to the service of one lord. We were led—no, indeed carried—high on a camel; and through a vast waste, fearing always our ruin, we clung to [the camel] rather than sat on it. Half-cooked meat was our food; and the milk of camels was our drink.²⁰⁹

To make things worse, Malchus was soon deprived of his clothes and forced to walk around almost naked. His jailers assigned him to shepherding duties, where he dreamed during the long days of Moses and Jacob, both of whom had been shepherds. He continued eating ‘fresh cheese and milk’, and sang psalms to himself to keep his spirits up. Later, he and his mysterious female companion (apparently placed in the story as a further spiritual challenge) managed to escape. Chased by their Saracen captors and facing certain doom, they were miraculously saved by the unlikely appearance of a lioness.²¹⁰

As well as being one of the more entertaining hagiographies, the *Life of St Malchus* is noteworthy for its use of the term ‘Ishmaelite’ to refer to the Saracens. The label, which was made prominent by the first-century historian Josephus and then, later, by writers such as Eusebius, linked the Arabs to the story and genealogy of Abraham, and the idea is presented as a way to explain their servitude and barbarism. In other texts, such as the *Life of St Euthymius* (below), the label is used alongside an explicit link with Sarah in order to offer an alternative ancestry whereby, as ‘heirs of the promise’, the barbaric Saracens can be redeemed through baptism.²¹¹ The ecclesiastical historian Sozomen was more explicit about the link between Arabs and Ishmael. He says that the Saracens ‘practise circumcision like the Jews [and] refrain from the use of pork, and observe many other Jewish rites and customs’. However, he continues, they had forgotten their origins and only rediscovered them when ‘some of their tribe afterwards happening to come in contact with the Jews, gathered from them the facts of their true origin’.²¹² This conception of Saracens as possessing a history of the Book allowed them to be included within the world view of Christian writers, and helped these authors to explain some of their customs and mannerisms in a way that made sense to a Christian audience.²¹³

Other elements of interest in the *Life of St Malchus* include dietary choices, the focus on raiding, and the taking of captives. The ‘cheese and milk’ and ‘half-cooked food’ seem sensational, but it has been suggested that via the Babylonian Talmud such ‘half-cooked food’ might actually reflect a legitimate choice of diet.²¹⁴ As noted earlier, hit-and-run raids did take place and caused disturbances for Romans and Persians alike; here, Jerome provides an insight into one result of these raids, the capture of humans apparently to use as slaves. As Noel Lenski has pointed out, there is widespread evidence for the use of slaves as sources of both labour and revenue by Arabs, and one of the most prominent exporters of this tactic would be the Arab leader Alamoundaros (al-Mundhir), allied with the Persians between 504 and 554, of whom more will be said in Chapter 4.²¹⁵ Nor was such raiding confined to Syria and the province of Arabia. The *Narrations* of Pseudo-Nilus, addressing tensions in the Sinai, report in a sensationalist manner that Arabs ‘live by hunting desert animals and devouring their flesh, or else get what they need by robbing people on roads that they watch in ambush’.²¹⁶ Not to be outdone, Ammonius described the savage murder of forty monks and the depredations suffered by the monasteries of the Sinai.²¹⁷

Finally, the sudden appearance of a lioness as a *deus ex machina* is a delightfully contrived and fairly common plot device. Numerous hagiographies demonstrate the omnipotence of the divine by resolving impossible situations in this fashion. For example, the biography of a monk named Saba tells how frantic prayers saved him from a desperate standoff with six ‘barbarous’ and ‘mischievous’ Saracens. In the nick of time, a chasm opened in the earth and one of the Arabs disappeared.²¹⁸ Elsewhere, in *The Spiritual Meadow* of John Moschus, a Saracen threatening a monk named Ianthos was also abruptly swallowed by a hole in the earth.²¹⁹

In another of his works, the *Life of St Hilarion*, Jerome introduces new themes in a meeting between the saint and a group of Saracens who had gathered at Elusa, to the southwest of the Dead Sea, for a celebration to ‘the Morning Star’, that is, the pagan deity known variously to Roman writers as Venus/Aphrodite or Uzzai. St Hilarion’s credentials included a familiarity with ways to drive demons from the sick, and he was able to draw a substantial crowd. He ‘pleasantly and with humility’ urged the assembled Saracens to abandon idol worship and take up the veneration of Christ instead. In a sudden and decisive ‘turn’—the literal meaning of the word ‘conversion’—the Saracens agreed and very soon one of their own was consecrated as a priest.²²⁰ At the end of the passage, Jerome said that:

crying abundantly and looking at the heavens he promised them that if they believed in Christ, he would come to them frequently. Wonderful is the grace of God! They would not allow him to leave, before he laid out the plan of a future church. Their priest, as he was wreathed, he marked with the sign of Christ.²²¹

The ideas present in this story—healing the sick, driving off demons, turning Arabs from pagan idol worship to faith in Christ, and the establishment of indigenous priests—appear repeatedly in the Christian literature well past the seventh century AD. The promise of a church, sketched out in ‘plan’ (perhaps laid out with stones), is particularly important: one focus of holy men as part of their missionary activities was to divert attention from the typical foci of desert life, such as watering holes or pasturage, and instead replace or combine those with other types of ‘fixed points’.²²² Churches or sanctuaries were ideal for this task, and eased contact between Arabs and holy men; the promise of this interaction is implicit in St Hilarion’s promise to ‘come to them frequently’. As imperial agents would also find such fixed points useful to conduct business with Arab leaders, particularly in the sixth century, this is one way in which the political dimension of Christianity could, without much effort, become a part of daily life for new adoptees of the religion.

Appended to his discussion of Queen Mavia, Sozomen tells a well-known story of a certain Arab chief named Zokomos, dated to c. 364. Zokomos and his wife had been unable to conceive, and in desperation, they consulted ‘a certain monk of great celebrity’ (Sozomen does not give his readers the name), and Zokomos was told that belief in Christ would produce the desired effect. Later, when a son was born to him, Zokomos brought his people *en masse* for baptism, and they all became Roman military allies as part of the process.²²³ Again, we see the political context given to the newly baptised. Becoming Christian in the empire also meant becoming Roman, to a certain extent, and the swift development of Zokomos from petitioner to military chief is so incidental to the story that one gets the impression that Sozomen nearly forgot to include it.

The ideas discussed here are also found in one of the most detailed narratives of the Christianisation of Arabs, concerning the establishment of the ‘Parembolē’, or encampments, around 420. The tale comes from a sixth-century collection of hagiographies written

by Cyril of Scythopolis, known as *The Lives of the Monks of Palestine*. The story of the Parembolē begins with a healing narrative: a certain Terebon (the Elder, to distinguish him from Terebon the Younger), while a child, was paralysed ‘by a demon’ along one side of his body. His father, whom Cyril calls ‘Aspebetus’—apparently a Hellenisation of the Persian title *spahbed*, or ‘master of horse’—searched frantically for a cure for Terebon but without success. At the time of these events, Cyril tells the reader, the Persians were carrying out the persecution of Christians which would eventually lead to the Roman-Persian war of 421/2 (the same conflict in which the troops of the Persian-allied Arab Alamundarus leapt to their deaths in the Euphrates).²²⁴ Aspebetus had been tasked with stopping Christians fleeing to the Roman empire, but instead he took pity on their plight. Evidently unhappy with the course of events, and seemingly targeted for arrest due to his failure to carry out his duties, he joined the throngs fleeing westwards.²²⁵

Later, a vision appeared to Terebon in a dream, and spurred on by divinely inspired optimism, Aspebetus made for a point in the desert where he found a monk named Theoctistus. Aspebetus described Terebon’s plight, and mentioned that all of the efforts by the Persian *magi* (holy men) had come to nothing. Pondering the situation, Theoctistus consulted Euthymius, who later healed Terebon by ‘praying fervently and sealing Terebon with the sign of the cross.’²²⁶ Aspebetus and those with him were astounded at this miracle, and they all adopted Christianity. As a sign of this sudden turn—another abrupt conversion—Aspebetus had his earlier identity discarded and was recreated as ‘Peter’, subsequently enjoying a prominent career as the first bishop of the ‘Parembolē’. Currency is given to this account by the appearance of Peter on a list of attendees at the Council of Ephesus (431).

The lengthy account of Cyril contains other familiar elements. On first arriving in Roman territory, Aspebetus had opened negotiations with Anatolius, *magister militum per Orientem* until 446, who ‘bound them in treaty with the Romans’—that is, made them *hypospondoi*—and similarly made Aspebetus phylarch ‘of the Saracens in Arabia who were in alliance with Rome’, hinting at a broader military role for Aspebetus than simply the leadership of his own people.²²⁷ Later, when Terebon had been healed, Euthymius kept his converts for a period of forty days, and through baptism and his catechism translated them ‘from slavery to freedom’.²²⁸ Terebon’s uncle, Maris, was so profoundly affected by events that he donated his worldly riches to build a monastery—another fixed point in the desert, and a new focus for the Christian Arabs under Peter—while Peter himself undertook the building of water cisterns, a place to bake bread, and religious structures described variously as cells for monks, a church, or an oratory.²²⁹ The actions of Euthymius are even more revealing. Cyril says that the new converts, those ‘who had formerly been wolves of Arabia but had then joined the rational flock of Christ’, were determined to keep Euthymius close by, so the monk ‘mark[ed] out a church for them and tents round it’, a place for them to settle.²³⁰ This is a very clear image once again of a dramatic conversion and settlement around a fixed place. The text is clearly intended to be both educational and rhetorical, but, again, some credence can be given to the general narrative. The subtle blending of ‘nomadic’ imagery in the form of the tents, which, together with the churches and other structures that made up the Parembolē, offers up a familiar hybrid of Roman and non-Roman which was part of the lived experience of newcomers into the Roman empire in late antiquity. This sort of imagery also appears elsewhere, for example, in the Syriac *Life* of Symeon the Stylite.²³¹

Euthymius asked Juvenal, the patriarch of Jerusalem, to ordain Peter; this apparently took place in about 427.²³² Later, following Peter’s ordination, attending the Council of Chalcedon (451) were ‘John, bishop of the Saracens’ (‘John of the *tayyaye*’, in Syriac), representing the episcopal province of Osroëne; ‘Eustathius of the Saracens’, from Phoenice II; another

John, ‘bishop of the encampments’ (the Paremboule), apparently a different Paremboule than the one described by Cyril.²³³ As it turned out, Peter was one of the very few Arab leaders in the sources who also went on to assume holy office, although he apparently continued his functions as phylarch at the same time.

The stories of Zokomos, St Malchus, St Hilarion, Aspebetus/Peter and others are just some of the numerous detailed stories about the conversion of Arabs and their integration into the political and social networks of Rome’s eastern provinces. The holy man is often the main interlocutor in the stories, mediating between civilisation and barbarism, between human and divine, and advocating for his converts. While Roman officials like Anatolius appear from time to time, they are often portrayed as subordinate actors or, at the very least, as men of secular power who do not interfere in the work of holy men, and, indeed, benefit from it by gaining a new pool of military manpower. One of the most important holy men in antiquity was Symeon the Stylite, whose lonely sojourn atop a pillar in the midst of a sanctuary won him a fame that transcended political and cultural boundaries across the Middle East. The different biographies of Symeon in Greek and Syriac feature Arab pilgrims who are drawn to the sanctuary at Telanissos, hoping for healing miracles, answers to unfathomable problems, or simply to see the saint for themselves.²³⁴ Antonius’ *Life* reports that Symeon had become so famous amongst the Arabs that when the saint died, ‘all the Arabs had gathered armed and on camels, for they too wanted to seize the body’.²³⁵

In one vignette provided by Theodoret, the bishop of Cyrrhus (b. 393), Arabs arrived in large numbers before Symeon, carrying their idols. Proceeding to smash the physical images of their impiety, they renounced Venus/Aphrodite and, like others we have seen in this chapter, permanently turned away from ‘uncivilised’ pursuits such as eating their camels.²³⁶ Theodoret, like Cyril, calls the Arabs ‘Ishmaelites’; in a different vignette, an ‘Ishmaelite queen’, unable to conceive, consulted Symeon through her male officials. After giving birth, she dispatched the child to Symeon for his blessing even while she, as a woman, was not permitted to stand before him.²³⁷

A noteworthy story that appears in the Syriac *Life of Symeon* (dated to 473) concerns a Persian Arab ally, bearing the common name Naaman (al-Numan), who, during a period of peace between Rome and Persia, made a pilgrimage of sorts to the shrine—Symeon’s fame was not confined to the Roman empire, and pilgrims came to him from all over the Christian world. Naaman was interested in finding out more about Symeon, and asked numerous questions of a certain Antiochus, a pilgrim. In particular, Naaman was worried—not entirely without justification—that if his men went to Symeon, they might become Christian and might just choose Roman service instead of fealty to him and to the Persian emperor. Naaman was so anxious that he threatened death to any of his men who dared to see Symeon—and threatened, to finish off their families as well.²³⁸

That night Naaman had a dream in which a ‘splendid man whose like I have never seen’ administered a beating that left him unable to function for nearly a month. This mysterious figure, St Symeon himself, threatened the same kind of collective punishment that Naaman himself had held over his men, and ordered that, instead, he should allow any who wished to see Symeon to do so. Naturally, after this event, Naaman was in no position to refuse; he gave an order that ‘churches and bishops and priests’ be allowed amongst his people and took the enlightened view that confessional choice was a personal affair, and he would not intervene.²³⁹ While we might be sceptical about the rather contrived elements of this story, the Persian Arabs in the sixth century took the middle road with regard to Christians in their ranks and their final member, another al-Numan, openly adopted Christianity, while al-Hira (below) was an important Christian centre in the Persian empire. The posture adopted by Naaman/al-Numan in the Syriac *Life* may not, therefore, be as artificial as it seems.

In addition to the literary texts, there are several inscriptions dating from the fourth and fifth centuries that show individuals often thought to be Arabs participating in one of the most visible types of public activity common in antiquity—that is, the dedication of buildings through inscriptions in Greek or Aramaic. The ‘Arab content’ of these early inscriptions is far more ambiguous than their sixth-century counterparts (Chapter 5), and is determined in a not entirely convincing way by examining names and other imprecise factors. For example, a martyrion of St John from al-Ramthaniye in the Golan from 377 was dedicated by a certain ‘Flavius Naaman’. As noted earlier, the name ‘Flavius’ was used in honour of the Flavian dynasty of Constantine, while the name Naaman/al-Numan is a familiar choice for Arabs who appear in late antique sources. The installations that surrounded the martyrion appear to have included animal pens and a source of water, which has suggested to some that the site had a ‘nomadic’ focus. It is of course possible that al-Ramthaniye was a type of fixed point that fostered communication and interaction.²⁴⁰

Another example, dating from 425 and found at Anasartha in Syria, was dedicated by a certain Mavia, inviting heroically futile efforts to connect this Mavia with the queen who rebelled against Valens. The ‘Arab content’ of this inscription is even less certain than at al-Ramthaniye.²⁴¹ Finally, and also from Anasartha, there is an undated dedication by one Silvanus mourning the death of his child, who is referred to as ‘a young bride of a phylarch’. Silvanus himself was ‘forever powerful among the *Eremboi*’, a Homeric reference to Arabs via the *Odyssey*. Unfortunately, nothing else about this inscription can be said with any confidence, despite attempts to connect Silvanus’ daughter to the career of Queen Mavia.²⁴²

The Christianisation of Arab populations was not, of course, confined to the Roman empire. As we saw earlier, there is evidence that both Mashmahig and Mazun were incorporated into the Church of the East. A story preserved in the *Chronicle of Seert*—a Nestorian historical compendium in Syriac assembled between the late ninth and early eleventh centuries, but now known solely from an Arabic translation²⁴³—suggests that a native of Mesene (Characene), Abd Yasu, was dispatched southwards in the late fourth century and ended up in the area around Bahrain, where he spread Christianity. Later, he lived out his retirement at al-Hira and apparently launched a Nestorian monastery there.²⁴⁴ Archaeologists have uncovered a number of monasteries and churches throughout the Gulf, including on Kharg Island, Falaika, and at Sir Bani Yas in the United Arab Emirates. The lack of inscriptions from these sites makes their identification and dating difficult, but they are likely to belong to a late date, perhaps even as late as the seventh century, well after the creation of the Church of the East and the establishment of metropolitan provinces such as Beth Qatraye, serving Qatar and its surrounding areas. If earlier Christian communities like the one ascribed to Abd Yasu existed, it is possible that they are not as visible in the archaeological record, perhaps due to their smaller size.²⁴⁵

In South Arabia, the Graeco-Egyptian merchant Cosmas Indicopleustes, who was in Aksum in c. 525, reported that the bishops on the island of Socotra took their cues from the church in Persia.²⁴⁶ The first bishops at Najran in South Arabia were consecrated by Philoxenus of Mabbug at the beginning of the sixth century; according to the *Chronicle of Seert*, Christianity had arrived at Najran sometime earlier, in approximately 450. The *Chronicle* describes a merchant named Hannan, who travelled to Constantinople before visiting al-Hira where he was baptised. On his return to Najran, he introduced Christianity to others.²⁴⁷ Whether this story is true or not, the medium by which the *Chronicle* asserts that Christianity arrived—via a tradesman—is certainly plausible (and this kind of vector may have been partly responsible for bringing Christianity to Persia in the first place, as noted earlier). Later stories from the Arab-Islamic tradition provide another explanation by

mentioning a Syrian, Fimiyyun, ending up as a slave in Najran. Upon seeing Fimiyyun praying one evening, his new owner was so thunderstruck by the spectacle that he and the rest of the Najranites adopted Christianity (another conversion *en masse*). A different story follows the miracles of one Abdallah b. Thamir, a recipient of Fimiyyun's ministrations, while yet another tale features the secret conversion of a Himyarite king!²⁴⁸ Whatever the exact story, a link with al-Hira is highly plausible. The recent discovery of new inscriptions at Hima, some ninety kilometres from Najran, many of which are explicitly Christian, together with Christian Robin's argument that Najran was by the fifth century the main trading partner of al-Hira, underscore the links between these two regions.²⁴⁹ In terms of Christology, while there were Nestorian Christians at Najran, it turned out that many of the Najranites adopted the Monophysite version of Christianity, which was perhaps favoured as a counterweight to the spread of Nestorian Christianity in the Gulf. Other 'heretical' communities also became established at Najran, such as the Phantasiasts or the exiled Monophysites from al-Hira, who embraced Julianism, named for its main proponent, Julian of Halicarnassus.²⁵⁰ By the end of the fifth century the Himyarite kings had begun to persecute Christians in Najran; this was a prelude to the significant massacre of Christians in the 520s (Chapter 4).

Al-Hira

With this discussion of Najran and its links with al-Hira, it is appropriate to turn to an examination of al-Hira itself, a city long associated with Persia's Arab allies.²⁵¹ The seventh-century Syriac *Khuzistan Chronicle* records that the city 'was settled by King Mundhir, surnamed the 'warrior'', a reference perhaps to the fifth-century leader who fought the Romans and enjoyed a close link with Bahram V (below).²⁵² Yet little is in fact known of this enigmatic city that went on to assume such a long afterlife in the Arab-Islamic and Persian literary traditions—a city, so the stories went, whose court was the centre of poetry, whose Nasrid kings codified Arabic, enjoyed sumptuous wine-addled parties, and sponsored literary circles. Much of this information comes from early Abbasid-era sources, composed between the eighth and eleventh centuries.²⁵³ During this period al-Hira possessed a romantic appeal and drew admirers of its faded glory; one poem, for example, yearns after the 'now abandoned campsites', which 'tell us of those who were here before'.²⁵⁴ Adam Talib has characterised this vision of al-Hira as the achievement of 'its complete mythical form as a lost paradise'.²⁵⁵

The name 'al-Hira' is derived from the Syriac *hirta*, meaning 'camp' (compare this with the etymology for Hatra, in Chapter 2), and it is possible that settlement there developed after that fashion. The Czech explorer Alois Musil (1868–1944) visited al-Hira in 1915, passing 'a continuous line of large piles of old building material', which together made up 'the outskirts of the old town of al-Hira'.²⁵⁶ Writing in his 1927 travelogue, *The Middle Euphrates*, Musil described Islamic-era ideas about al-Hira, principally derived from al-Baladhuri:

This town, built on the very edge of the desert, was formed of a few groups of fortified buildings with gardens and fields between them. Such a group of buildings, called *kasr* (pl. *ksur*), 'castle,' is rectangular. Its center is formed by a courtyard entirely enclosed by the separate buildings. The outer walls, which are higher than the inner ones, are strongly built and are provided with loopholes in their upper parts and with towers at the corners, giving the whole the aspect of a fort. Through the outer wall a single fortified gate leads into the yard, and from this doors open into the separate buildings, which have no other exits. These *ksur* are either narrow or wide, according to the number of the members of the respective clans who live together in them.²⁵⁷

This idea of the site comprising a group of structures interspersed with empty spaces is echoed today by the various mounds that dot the archaeological site of al-Hira, just south of modern Najaf. Two seasons of limited excavation were carried out by David Talbot Rice in 1931 and 1932; assessing eleven of the mounds in 1931, Talbot Rice uncovered the remnants of two churches which he dated to the sixth century, although this dating has now been called into question.²⁵⁸ Later, in 1990, a French team returned under difficult circumstances.²⁵⁹ Recently, the site has witnessed new work: in 2015 it was surveyed by a team sponsored by the Max van Berchem Foundation, and an Iraqi team conducted a series of excavations between 2007 and 2011. Finds from these excavations (undertaken in light of the expansion of the Najaf airport) included a great deal of Christian material, and the archaeologists may even have identified one of the monasteries of al-Hira. One find was a stunning slab with a Christian inscription in Arabic reading, ‘Blessing from God – May God forgive Abd al-Masih’.²⁶⁰ However, the consistently late date of the material found at al-Hira has led some to suggest that the Nasrid-era city may, in fact, be located elsewhere. Indeed, Talbot Rice himself raised the idea that this older part of the city is perhaps to be found either further to the east, or to the south²⁶¹ (Figure 3.7).

Al-Hira was well placed for the transit of ideas from Arabia, the eastern provinces of Persia, and indeed the Roman empire, as it sat astride trade routes leading from Babylonia to the west.²⁶² Furthermore, al-Hira quickly gained a reputation as an important Christian centre, which was part of the patriarchal see of Beth Arabaye. The monastery of Dayr Mar Awdisho was founded close to the city in the third quarter of the fourth century.²⁶³ There were Christian bishops at al-Hira from the very birth of the Church of the East: bishop Hosea of al-Hira attended the synod of 410 at Seleucia, while bishop Simeon took part in the synod of Dadisho in 424, which drew the Church of the East firmly out of the Roman theological orbit. Gustav Rothstein was able to use the *Synodicon Orientale* to recreate the list of these bishops



Figure 3.7 Google Earth Pro image of the main area of al-Hira, taken in December 2010. The city is within the trapezoid sandy area at centre. The Najaf airport is clearly visible at the top of the frame. The pre-Islamic city of al-Hira may, in fact, lie to the south or east. Image © 2019 DigitalGlobe, © 2019 CNES/Airbus, © 2018 Google.

between 410 and the beginning of the seventh century, identifying eight in all.²⁶⁴ Later, six of the Church of the East's *catholicoi* would be buried at al-Hira.²⁶⁵ There were several monasteries there, including some of considerable fame (Chapter 4). John of Ephesus, in his life of the charismatic Monophysite bishop Simeon of Beth Arsham, says that he travelled even:

as far as the camp of the Saracens of the tribe of Numan [al-Hira], which he often visited; so that he gained a large number of Saracens in it, and he induced the magnates who were converted by his words to build a Christian church in it.²⁶⁶

Simeon's creed did not take root at al-Hira in the way that Nestorian, Dyophysite Christianity did, but Monophysitism found greater favour to the north, where the sixth-century bishop of Beth Arabaye, Ahudemme, later conducted missionary work amongst the Arabs of the Jazira, exorcising demons and curing ailments. This was a more apolitical form of Christianity, less tied to expectations of military service and political subordination than other examples discussed here. Nevertheless, the style of the conversion stories is very similar, involving the renunciation of idols, and the healing of the sick. Most notably, Ahudemme adroitly combined the rhythms of tribal life with the new faith, establishing churches as 'fixed points', and naming them for individual tribal leaders.²⁶⁷

Other missionaries active at al-Hira included Abraham the Great of Kashkar, whom the *Chronicle of Seert* says visited the city, turning many away from the cult of Venus/Aphrodite.²⁶⁸ Such a staunch Christian pedigree for al-Hira adds credence to the account of Naaman's visit to the shrine of Symeon, and indeed the presence of Christians in al-Hira was a source of great interest for those writing in the Abbasid period. Al-Tabari (relying on his source, the famous Hisham al-Kalbi, who 'claimed to have done his research in [al-Hira's] church archives')²⁶⁹ wrote that the population of al-Hira at the time of Ardashir was made up of: Tanukh, who, we have seen from the South Arabian inscriptions, were thought to be located in Iraq around al-Hira; the 'Ibad', Christian 'devotees' who lived in the city, and who, like al-Hira itself, achieved a long-lasting fame in later sources; and a group that he calls 'confederates', people who were neither Tanukh nor Ibad, and who may have come from the south, i.e., from the Arabian Peninsula.²⁷⁰ The long Christian history of al-Hira positioned the city favourably in a new era of universal monotheism after the seventh century, and so the Ibad could claim to have been 'an elite group, where Christian allegiance bound together men of very different lineages and gave them a prestigious role as Hira's aristocracy'.²⁷¹ Further proof of the privileged position of al-Hira's Christian population is provided by a bowl found at Raqqa in Syria, with the Arabic inscription 'Made by Ibrahim the Christian, out of the things [made] at al-Hira for the Amir Sulayman son of the Prince of the Believers [i.e., the caliph]'; the bowl is believed to be of mid-eighth century date.²⁷²

Al-Hira also assumed a certain specific celebrity for the Arab-Islamic and Persian traditions because of events in the second quarter of the fifth century. A number of texts describe how the future Sasanian king Bahram V (420–38) was raised at al-Hira in a palace at al-Khawarnaq that had been built for him under the auspices of the Persian Arab Nasrid kings. As a young man, Bahram was tutored by al-Mundhir (the same as the Alamundarus who appears in Roman sources for the war of 420/1, above).²⁷³ Bahram's time at al-Hira is thought to have cemented the close bonds between the imperial throne and the Nasrids. Indeed, it would be to the sixth century and the beginning of the seventh that the heyday of al-Hira and its famous leaders would belong, before their spectacular fall from grace at the hands of Khusrau II (Chapter 4).

Towards the sixth century: Kinda, Mudar, and Maadd

As the Roman empire emerged from the civil wars of the third and fourth centuries, was divided at the end of the fourth, and achieved a modicum of stability, numerous changes had taken place along the eastern empire's Arabian frontier. The province of Arabia changed shape several times in late antiquity as the authorities in Constantinople tinkered with the administrative arrangements of the region. Most notably, at the end of the fourth century the new province of Palaestina Salutaris (whose name changed to Palaestina Tertia later on) was created, taking with it the southern part of Arabia, including Petra.²⁷⁴ The southernmost Roman garrison was at Ayla (Aqaba), and the region that included Hegra and Tayma, in the northwest of the Arabian Peninsula, was apparently no longer under direct Roman control (Figure 3.8). An inscription from the middle of the fourth century at Hegra refers to a chief citizen of the city, and excavations at Tayma have revealed evidence for habitation at around the same date, but little about the local government of the time is known.²⁷⁵

By the middle of the fifth century the vast deserts of central Arabia had more or less come under Himyarite control.²⁷⁶ This development was reflected in a change in the royal title used by Himyar's rulers, who now styled themselves kings 'of Saba, of dhu-Raydan, of Hadramawt and of Yamnat, and of the Arabs of the Upper Country and the Coast' (emphasis added), with the new additions referring to Central and Western Arabia, respectively. Later inscriptions modified this titulature to state 'their Arabs' instead of 'the Arabs', clearly subordinating Arab communities under the Himyarite kings. Royal control was effected in part through clientship, via Kinda and Maadd, along with a western Arabian tribal group called Mudar that included Quraysh, the tribe of the Prophet Muhammad. An inscription found in a ravine at Masal al-Jumh, some distance to the west of modern Riyadh, records that Abikarib Asad (c. 400–45) and his son Hassan Yuhamin (perhaps 445–50) 'took possession of the land of Maadd', the region previously targeted in the third quarter of the fourth century, and left behind military garrisons drawn from the Himyarite communes.²⁷⁷ An undated inscription (but likely from the mid-fifth century), records what appears to be another expedition in central Arabia. The text records 'the chiefs of Tanukh', suggesting that contingents from al-Hira were involved, perhaps as the opposing combatants. The text also reveals that a certain 'Numanan' (al-Numan) from Mudar appeared at Masal al-Jumh, but whether as a supplicant or a victorious ally is unclear.²⁷⁸ In any case, one thing that emerges from the fifth-century Himyarite inscriptions is the prestige won by Kinda over the last century. In the inscription of Abikarib Asad and Hassan Yuhamin, two main bodies of troops are mentioned, those of Hadramawt and Saba, the South Arabian communes, and 'their Arabs', led foremost by Kinda.²⁷⁹

Kinda would go on to participate regularly in Himyarite expeditions, almost always under control of the Hadrami princes of dhu-Yazan. Yet while the inscriptions discussing these events accord Kinda the first place among the Arab allies, they are far less informative when it comes to describing individual leaders of Kinda. As Robin has pointed out, this is in marked contrast to the Arab-Islamic tradition, which takes great interest in the 'kings of Kinda'.²⁸⁰ One of the main sources for the latter is the discussion in the ninth-century *Kitab al-Muhabbar* of Ibn Habib, which states that during Adikarib's campaigns, one 'Hujr b. Amr' was established as the Himyarite deputy over Maadd. A long list of successors follows, together with a description of their deeds, which included a spirited rivalry with the Arab kings of al-Hira; a similar story is provided by al-Tabari.²⁸¹ The 'Hujr b. Amr' of Ibn Habib is probably the same individual known from an undated inscription surrounded by graffiti and found in the Nafud al-Musamma, north of Hima, that simply records 'Hujr, b. [son of] Amr, king²⁸² of



Figure 3.8 Arabia and the Three Palestines in Late Antiquity. Illustration by Aaron Styba.

Kiddat [Kinda]'.²⁸³ It is perhaps possible that a significant number of Kinda (and thus likely Madhhij) moved northwards as the Kindite leaders assumed the representation of Himyar's interests in *Arabia Deserta*.²⁸⁴ Further details in the text of Ibn Habib also raise the possibility that the northwest, including the region around Hegra and Tayma, may have fallen under the control of Mudar; an inscription from 455/6 at Umm Jadhayidh, written in a script that is an intermediate style between Nabataean and Arabic, refers to one 'Amru the king', possibly a local (Mudar?) Arab leader under either Himyarite (or Roman?) influence.²⁸⁵

The close relationship between Kinda and Himyar, and the later Roman attempts to woo the successors to Hujr (Chapter 4), raises questions about what religions were practised amongst the group and its elite. Shortly before the end of the third century, a king of Kinda, Malik, son of Muawiyat, had dedicated a bronze statuette in the Great Temple at Marib; the accompanying inscription records his submission to Shammar Yuharish, in the context of the Himyarite conquest of Saba and Hadramawt. Given the location of the dedication and the fact that at that time the religious reform that moved Himyar from polytheism to Judeo-Monotheism had not yet taken place, it seems reasonable to assume that the Kindite king was also polytheist.²⁸⁶ The later religious choice of Kindite kings is less clear, in part because only two inscriptions (that from the Great Temple and probably the undated inscription of

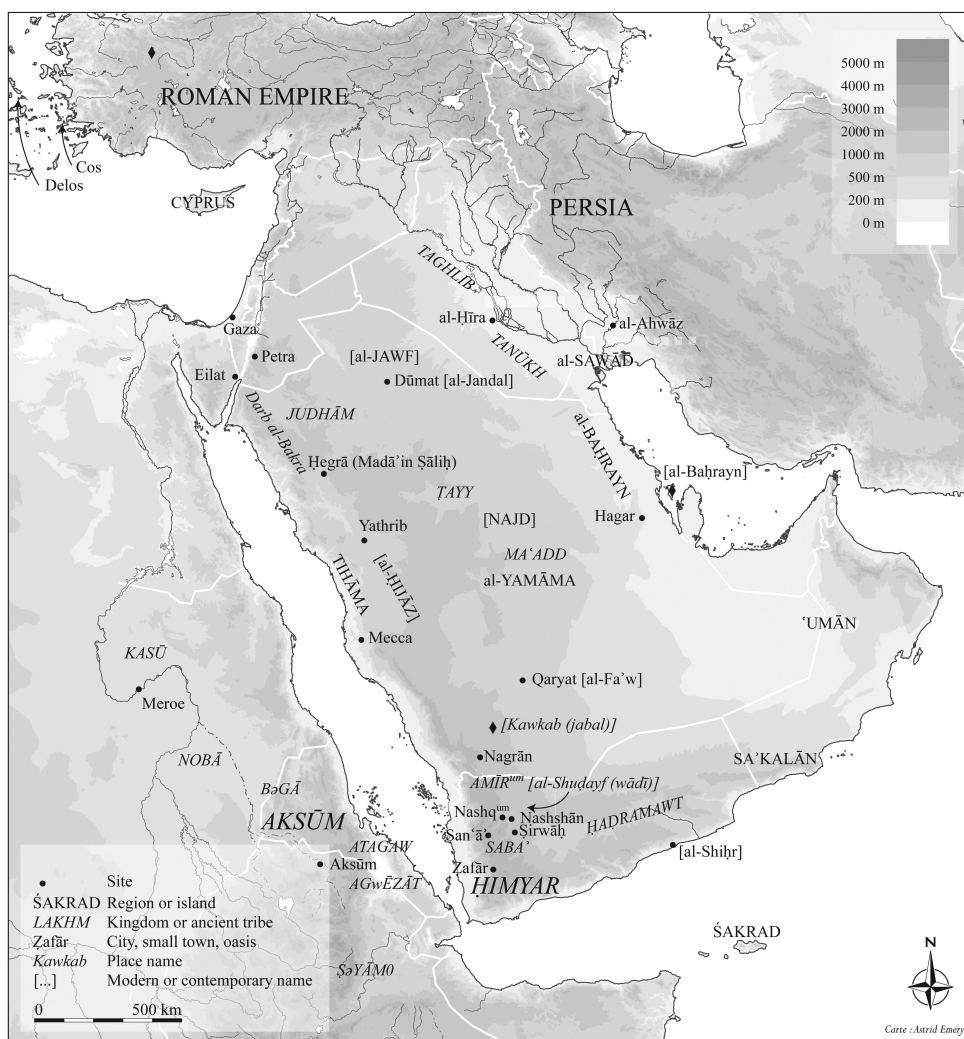


Figure 3.9 Arabia and Ethiopia in the time of the kingdom of Himyar. Illustration by Astrid Emery; amended by Carla Russo. Reproduced by kind permission of Astrid Emery.

Hujr) were written by the leaders of Kinda themselves. In a detailed study, Robin suggests that while those members of Kinda most closely linked with the Himyarite monarchy and the dhu-Yazan likely followed Judeo-Monotheism, the particular circumstances in which the Kinda leaders in central-northern Arabia found themselves presented a rather different situation, especially if missionaries were moving from al-Hira to Najran through central Arabia. As the Romans strengthened their diplomatic initiatives in northern Arabia under Justinian (527–65), political opportunism likely proved more of a factor than the religious confession of distant princes.²⁸⁷

By the year 500, Himyar, via Kinda and Maadd, controlled much of central Arabia, while both Rome and Persia were under the guidance of monarchs with lengthy tenures of the imperial throne—Anastasius (491–518) and Kavadh (488–96/498–531), with the latter surviving a difficult challenge to his rule after a decade in power (Figure 3.9). All three states were using Arabs as either enlisted members of the army (in the case of the regiments described in the *Notitia*) or as proxies and military partners to assist with the frequent campaigns and raids that were a regular feature of daily life. While the sixth century would witness the apex of Roman and Himyarite power, state policies in Rome and Persia would also provide the necessary catalyst to cement Arab authority in the Middle East, in this, the last century before the emergence of Islam—and it is to this critical period in the region's history that we now turn.

Notes

- 1 Daryae 2013: 3. For an ancient view see Agathias, 2.27.1–5.
- 2 Cassius Dio, 78.2; Potter 2004: 135.
- 3 Cassius Dio, 78.16.7 (Achilles); 79.1 (Arbela).
- 4 Cassius Dio, 79.5.
- 5 See Potter 2004.
- 6 Veh Ardashir was also known as New Seleucia (Greek) and Kokhe (Syriac). Later, further suburbs were built and the agglomeration became known as *al-madain*, 'the cities'. Despite being perhaps the greatest metropolis of the ancient world, today, nearly nothing remains of the site, which is buried under acres of farmland and the shifting courses, over time, of the Tigris. A useful summary of the various incarnations of Seleucia-Ctesiphon can be found at: www.sasanika.org/sites/ctesiphon/ (accessed February 21, 2019), and the site is discussed (with others) in Simpson 2017, with an extremely useful map of *al-madain* at 25.
- 7 Hauser 2013: 139.
- 8 Herodian, 6.5.10, trans. Whittaker.
- 9 E.g. Zonaras, 12.15.
- 10 E.g. as found in the well-known passage from Cassius Dio, 80.3.1–2; see also Herodian, 6.2.1–2; Potter 2004: 223–4; Edwell 2008: 157; Shayegan 2013: 806; Dignas and Winter 2007: 56–62. Tacitus, *Annals* 6.31 also reports that the Parthians had made similar claims on 'ancient boundaries'. See Gregoratti 2017b: 131.
- 11 Howard-Johnston 2014: 161. On Tansar/Tosar and his role with regards to Ardashir, see Kreyenbroek 2013.
- 12 Howard-Johnston 2014: 171. For a detailed examination see Payne 2017.
- 13 Daryae 2013: 15; Canepa 2009; Canepa 2013: 862; Potter 2004: 222.
- 14 Shayegan 2013: 806; Payne 2016: 212.
- 15 So-called due to his place of birth at Philippopolis (Shahba, in southern Syria).
- 16 Shayegan 2013: 808–9.

- 17 See Maricq 1958 and Honigsmann 1953. For an English translation of the Parthian and Middle Persian texts, see sasanika.org (UC Irvine). Payne 2016: 212–13.
- 18 *Historia Augusta, Aurelian* 28.1–5; Potter 2004: 266–72.
- 19 Eutropius, *Breviarium* 9.24, trans. Watson.
- 20 Eutropius, *Breviarium* 9.25; Peter the Patrician, *fragment*. 13–14; Dignas and Winter 2007: 122–30; Potter 2004, 280–93.
- 21 Potter 2004: 514–20.
- 22 Howard-Johnston 2010; see Chapter 4.
- 23 See Morley 2016.
- 24 Theophylact Simocatta, 4.11.2–3, trans. Whitby. Peter the Patrician, *fragment* 13, recorded Narseh approaching the Roman emperor Diocletian with the words ‘it is obvious for all mankind that the Roman and Persian empires are like two lamps; and it is necessary that, like eyes, the one is brightened by the light of the other and that they do not angrily strive for each other’s destruction’, translated in Dignas and Winter 2007: 122–3.
- 25 Tradition asserts that Yazdegerd I was offered the guardianship of the future Roman emperor, Theodosius II. Later, negotiations took place between Kavadh and Justin I that nearly saw the Roman emperor adopt Kavadh’s son, Khusrau (I). See Malalas, *Chronicle*, 17.10/p. 415; Daryaei 2012: 195. For Constantius and Shapur see Ammianus, 17.5.3, 17.5.10.
- 26 See the classic study of Fowden (G) 1993.
- 27 For Kerdir’s career see Kreyenbroek 2013.
- 28 The ancient title of the Achaemenid kings. See Dignas and Winter 2007: 57.
- 29 Daryaei 2013: 5; Daryaei 2008: 60; Shayegan 2013: 805.
- 30 As noted above, ‘non-Iran’ was added by Shapur. See Shayegan 2013.
- 31 SKZ 1 = www.sasanika.org/wp-content/uploads/NAQSH.pdf (accessed January 14, 2019).
- 32 Quote from Canepa 2013: 863. See Daryaei 2013: 5 and Potter 2004: 220–1. An image can be found at https://oi.uchicago.edu/gallery/sasanian-rock-reliefs-naqsh-i-rustam-and-naqsh-i-rajab#8B8_72dpi.png (accessed January 14, 2019).
- 33 See https://oi.uchicago.edu/gallery/sasanian-rock-reliefs-naqsh-i-rustam-and-naqsh-i-rajab#8C12_72dpi.png (accessed January 14, 2019) and <https://www.livius.org/article/s/place/naqs-e-rajab/naqs-e-rajab-investiture-relief-of-ardasir-i/> (accessed January 25, 2019) for details. The inscription is Kerdir’s *KNRb*.
- 34 Potter 2004: 444–5; Kulikowski 2007: 109–11; Bowersock 2013, Chapter 5.
- 35 Drake 2006.
- 36 Walker 2012: 1014. See, for example, the letter purportedly written by Constantine to Shapur II, quoted by Eusebius, *Life of Constantine* 4.8–13, in which Constantine expresses his concern for Christians everywhere. See Hoyland 2015: 12–16 and Patterson 2017: 190–1.
- 37 Allen 2000; Fowden (G) 1993; van Rompay 2005.
- 38 Today the city of the same name, in Saudi Arabia.
- 39 For the thorny debates over Christology, see Gray 2005, van Rompay 2005, and Allen 2000.
- 40 Millar 2013c: 110.
- 41 Walker 2012: 998–1000. The *Chronicle of Arbela*, p. 3, explicitly mentions the arrival of a bishop with traders.
- 42 *Chronicle of Arbela*, p. 27, trans. Kroll.

- 43 Millar 2013b: 46.
- 44 For a comprehensive examination of the ‘Church of the East’ see Walker 2012. On the synod see Wood (P) 2012: 58–62; see also Debié 2010 and McDonough 2008. After 410 there were synods in 486, 544, 554, 576, 585, 598, 605, and a conference of bishops in 612. See Brock 1992.
- 45 Patterson 2017: 189 notes the comparison made in the *Synodicon Orientale* between Yazdegerd and Constantine, i.e., as patrons of the church.
- 46 Brock 1992: 130.
- 47 Payne 2016: 216.
- 48 Payne 2015; Payne 2016; Walker 2012: 1004, and see too 1014.
- 49 Payne 2016 examines this in detail. See too McDonough 2011: 303–5.
- 50 Shayegan 2013: 208.
- 51 Gray 2005; Bevan and Gray 2009; Millar 2013b: 51–2, on the term ‘Miaphysite’. Brock 1992: 132 identifies seven distinct positions within the ‘Christological spectrum’.
- 52 For Jews at Hegra see Hoyland 2001: 146; for Jews in Arabia more generally see Robin 2015c.
- 53 Daryaei 2012: 190; Walker 2012: 998.
- 54 See paragraphs 11 and 12 of the inscription (KKZ) translated at www.cais-soas.com/CAIS/Languages/pahlavi/kartir_inscription.htm (D. Mackenzie; accessed January 14, 2019).
- 55 Edwell 2008: 155–6; Daryaei 2012: 190.
- 56 Lenski 2011: 251–2.
- 57 Dirven 2006–2007: 373.
- 58 Excavations at the same temple revealed a magnificent sculpture of Heracles, whose base included one of the Latin inscriptions found there. See text and photograph in Jakubiak 2015: 470–2.
- 59 One of the three Parthian legions founded by Septimius Severus. The legion’s garrison was Singara, i.e., Jabal Sinjar, in Iraq.
- 60 Translation based on that of Oates, in Jakubiak 2015: 470.
- 61 Cassius Dio, 80.3.2, trans. Cary; Edwell 2008: 153; Oates 1955. For Ardashir’s attack on Hatra see Cassius Dio, 80.3.2.
- 62 al-Tabari, 1.827–9.
- 63 Hauser 2013: 123.
- 64 Hauser 2013.
- 65 Daryaei 2013: 2–6; Piacentini 1985.
- 66 Schiettecatte 2012: 252.
- 67 Ulrich 2011; Kennet 2008; Kennet 2007.
- 68 Daryaei 2016; Daryaei 2003.
- 69 Daryaei 2003.
- 70 Lawrence and Wilkinson 2017: 104–6, with a map of the *Khandaq Shapur* at 105. See too Kennet 2007: 89; Munt *et al.* 2015: 497; Morley 2017: 271, 273.
- 71 Lawrence and Wilkinson 2017: 104. There is an ongoing project on this structure; interested readers can visit www.facebook.com/KhandaqShapur/ for details (accessed March 3, 2019).
- 72 Kennet 2008: 55; Morony 1988: 16.
- 73 al-Tabari, 1.820. For the possibility that Sanatruq was a Characenean governor see Mouton and Cuny 2009: 123.
- 74 Hamza al-Isfahani, *Tarikh* p. 48, trans. Hoyland 2018: 62.

- 75 Potts 2008: 198. Kennet 2008: 58: ‘The discrepancy [between the different positions] might be a meaningless omission, or it might be a result of the ambiguity surrounding the Sasanian administrative names and their Early Islamic equivalents, or it might be a reflection of historical reality’.
- 76 Potts 1990, vol 2: 124, 150; for Ardashir and Bahrain, 230; for Ibn Qutayba, see the discussion with full references at 234.
- 77 Mouton and Cuny 2009: 123–4. See too Morony 1988.
- 78 Potts 2008: 198.
- 79 SKZ 1; See Potts 1990, vol. 2: 256–7, and the discussion in Thomson’s edition of Moses’ text. The bishop of Mashmahig, Batai, was deposed in favour of a certain Elias. For this see *Synodicon Orientale*, pp. 273–5 and the discussion in Trimmingham 1979: 281; see also Kennet 2007: 88.
- 80 Trimmingham 1979: 282.
- 81 Kennet 2008: 56.
- 82 Kennet 2007. The coins are discussed by Potts 2010d: 70. Munt 2017: 265 characterises the problem in general as ‘an emerging disconnect between the evidence presented by archaeological research, on the one hand, and the Arabic literary sources for Oman’s history, on the other’.
- 83 The phrase of Potts in a very good discussion on this problem in Potts 1997: 103.
- 84 Potts 2008: 199–200.
- 85 Kennet 2008: 57.
- 86 Kennet 2007: 89–94.
- 87 Ammianus, 23.6.10, trans. Rolfe.
- 88 al-Jahwari *et al.* 2018: 737.
- 89 Mouton and Cuny 2012: 184; Mouton 2009. The identification of Jazirat al-Ghanam as a Sasanian military outpost was made by de Cardi 1972. For Khatt see Kennet 1998; see also the summary in al-Jahwari *et al.* 2018. For Kush see Kennet 2009.
- 90 Cf. Mouton 2009.
- 91 Potts 1997: 103. ‘[I]t would be rash to pile the narratives of Pliny and other authors onto the skeletal epigraphic record’. See too Daryaei 2016 and the very measured views in Munt 2017.
- 92 Morley 2017: 271.
- 93 Yule 2009. See also Yule 2013b.
- 94 Mouton and Cuny 2009: 123; Kennet 2007.
- 95 For Sohar see Kervran 2004.
- 96 See al-Jahwari *et al.* 2018: 738, with references.
- 97 Robin 2012b: 276–7. The famous Aksumite royal inscription from Adulis copied in the first quarter of the sixth century by Cosmas Indicopleustes refers to war against the ‘Arabitae and Cinaedocolpitaē’, with the latter a probable reference to Kinda. See Cosmas, *Christian Topography* p. 64, Power 2012: 21–3, and Bowersock 2013, Chapters 2 and 3.
- 98 Tanukh is also known from a mysterious Nabataean/Greek inscription from Umm al-Jimal in Jordan (*LPNab* 41 and *PUAES* IIIA #238). The text is a memorial to one Fihir, ‘tutor of Gadhimat king of Tanukh’, but nothing else is known about the tutor or why he was at Umm al-Jimal. See Macdonald *et al.* 2015.
- 99 Schiettecatte and Arbach 2016.
- 100 Gajda 2009: 37–8.
- 101 Robin 2015b.
- 102 On this remarkable site see the detailed study in Maraqtan 2015.

- 103 Almaqah was the patron god of the Sabaeans. See Robin 2015a and 2015b.
- 104 See Potts 2008: 200–3 for a useful discussion; Robin 2014a.
- 105 Overlaet 2009.
- 106 al-Tabari, 1.836; Potts 2008: 202–3.
- 107 al-Tabari, 1.838, trans. Bosworth, p. 54; al-Thaalabi = see Potts 1990: p. 240.
- 108 This inscription (MB 2004-I-123) has been presented by M. Maraqtan at a number of conferences. See Schiettecatte and Arbach 2016.
- 109 For the career of this king, see Robin 2014b.
- 110 Robin 2015b: 138; Robin 2013: 212.
- 111 Robin 2013: 212. Robin notes that Murad's links with Kinda were likely to be more indirect than those of Madhhij.
- 112 Robin 2013: 213.
- 113 Robin 2013; al-Ansary 2010.
- 114 Berkey 2003: 43.
- 115 Robin 2013: 207–8. For Kinda's intransigence on trade see the fascinating argument in Bukharin 2009.
- 116 See Maraqtan 2017 for a new inscription discovered in the Awam temple at Marib addressing the early relationship between Himyar and Kinda.
- 117 See Schiettecatte 2011: 165. For the campaigns see Robin 2014a: 36–40.
- 118 al-Azmeh 2014b: 105; Zwettler 2000. Webb 2016: 74 considers Maadd to be 'the byword for a super-collective communal identity'.
- 119 Robin 2014b: 26–7; Robin 2008a for the territory of Maadd; Schiettecatte and Arbach 2016: 189–90. For an older but very useful examination see Zwettler 2000.
- 120 Pottery collected within the fort suggests a third/fourth c. date. See Macdonald 2008b: 320.
- 121 Macdonald 2008b discusses the site, the hydrological system, and the tomb, with ample illustrations.
- 122 Robin *et al.* 2014: 1046.
- 123 Zwettler 1993; Macdonald in Fiema *et al.* 2015: 405–9.
- 124 Schiettecatte and Arbach 2016: 181.
- 125 Shitomi 1997. See Potts 2008 for a rebuttal.
- 126 Macdonald 2008b.
- 127 Sartre 2016.
- 128 See Shayegan 2012: 109–38. Humbach and Skjærvø's text translation of the Paikuli inscription (vol. 3.1) can be found at: www.sasanika.org/wp-content/uploads/Paikuli.pdf (accessed March 4, 2019).
- 129 Robin 2008a: 182.
- 130 See Fisher and Wood 2016: 255.
- 131 Robin 2014: 39–40.
- 132 See Zwettler 1993 for a useful survey and analysis.
- 133 Macdonald 2008b: 320, and fig. 16, for photographs of the surviving decorated capital.
- 134 Schmitt 2005: 278; see also Heather 2001; Heather 1997; Isaac 2000; Blockley 1985. Isaac 2000.
- 135 James 1988: 44.
- 136 Wickham 2009: 79–81.
- 137 Sarris 2011: 109; see Wickham 2009: 90. Quote from Anonymus *Valesianus*, 61, discussed in Elton 2015.
- 138 See Wickham 2005: 335–6; Camps 1982, 1983, and 1984; Brüggemann 2005: 245–6.
- 139 Desanges 1996. For this and the previous text see too Modéran 2003 and the discussion in Merrills 2015; see too Brüggemann 2005: 246–7.

- 108 *Enemies, allies, and pretenders, AD 211–500*
- 140 Merrills 2015: 281; Brett and Fentress 1996: 77–9; Rushworth 2000: 82; Camps 1984: 205–6.
- 141 Mattingly 1995: 195–99; Brogan and Smith 1984.
- 142 James 1988: 61–3.
- 143 Julian, *Oration* 1.21B.
- 144 Ammianus, 24.1.5.
- 145 Ammianus, 25.8.5, trans. Rolfe.
- 146 Ammianus, 23.3.8, trans. Rolfe.
- 147 Ammianus, 25.6.9–10, trans. Rolfe.
- 148 Schmitt 2005: 278.
- 149 Ammianus, 24.2.4.
- 150 Inan 75. See Robin 2015d: 95–6.
- 151 Schiettecatte and Arbach 2016: 188–9.
- 152 The Zaydmanat inscription was discovered by Sulayman al-Dhuyayb. See the discussion in Robin 2015d: 96–8.
- 153 Ptolemy, *Geography* 6.7.6; Pliny, *Natural History* 6.32.8. See Schiettecatte and Arbach 2016: 188.
- 154 Robin 2015d: 96.
- 155 Ammianus, 14.4.1–7, trans. Rolfe.
- 156 Ptolemy, *Geography* 5.17.21. The term was also used by Eusebius, quoting a letter from Dionysius of Alexander (247/8–64/5). See Hainthaler 2012: 32.
- 157 See Millar 2005; Hainthaler 2012: 33; Ward 2015: 27. The ‘Ishmaelite’ identity of Arabs is discussed later in this chapter.
- 158 Graf 1978; Graf and O’Connor 1977.
- 159 Graf 1978; Graf and O’Connor 1977.
- 160 Graf 1978.
- 161 Retsö 2003: 518–21.
- 162 *Synodicon Orientale*, p. 43.
- 163 The name Tayy appears in the Safaitic inscriptions as well as on a number of texts from the Arabian Peninsula, including Riyam 2006–17 and Murayghan 3 (Chapter 4).
- 164 Segal 1984: 103.
- 165 Macdonald 2009c: 3–5; Hoyland 2001: 235.
- 166 See Retsö 2003: 511.
- 167 Whately 2013.
- 168 *Notitia Dignitatum Or.* 32.
- 169 *Notitia Dignitatum Or.* 32. For the identification of Dumayr with Thelsee, see Shahid 1984b: 398.
- 170 *Notitia Dignitatum Or.* 28.
- 171 *Notitia Dignitatum Or.* 34.
- 172 *Notitia Dignitatum Or.* 34.
- 173 *Notitia Dignitatum Or.* 31.
- 174 Spaul 1994: 176–8.
- 175 *Notitia Dignitatum Or.* 36 and 28.
- 176 See Lenski 2011.
- 177 See most importantly: Parker 1986 and 1987, with Banning 1986 and 1987; Graf 1989; Isaac 2000; Kennedy 2004; Macdonald 2009d; Lewin 2007; Mayerson 1989. There is a useful summary in Sartre 2005: 143–5, and see too the classic study of frontiers by Whittaker 1994.
- 178 Isaac 2000: 175–6.

- 179 The *stationes agrariae* were places of strategic interest, such as sources of water, protected by the Roman army. See Kennedy 2004: 72.
- 180 *AE* 1948 (trans. Fisher). See Millar 2013c: 141.
- 181 Walker 2006: 48–9; Walker 2006–7.
- 182 See Segal 1984: 105–6; Greatrex 1998a.
- 183 al-Tabari, 1.836, trans. Bosworth. See also Potts 1990, vol. 2: 239–41.
- 184 Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.38, trans. Hartranft. On the revolt see further Lewin 2007; Lenski 2002: 208–9; Bowersock 1980.
- 185 Lewin 2007. The term *hyposondos* (sg.) is used by Socrates Scholasticus, *Ecclesiastical History* 4.36, as well as by Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History*, 6.38 and 7.1.
- 186 Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.38, trans. Hartranft.
- 187 Ammianus, *History* 31.16.5–6. See Shahid 1984b: 257; Woods 2002; Lenski 2002; Whately 2014.
- 188 For the fascinating figure of the Kahina, see Brett and Fentress 1996.
- 189 Modéran 2003, for North African *principes*. For the idea of the chief as pivot or middleman, see Salzman 1974 and Chapter 5.
- 190 Robin 2015b: 127–9; Robin 2014b; Gajda 2009: 39–41. For a very detailed examination of Judaism in Himyar, see Robin 2015c. Finster 2010: 68.
- 191 Robin 2010a: 65; Nebes 2010: 39–40; Robin 2017b; Haas 2008.
- 192 Rubin 1989: 386.
- 193 Robin 2015b.
- 194 Robin 2014b: 15.
- 195 Gajda 2017.
- 196 Schiettecatte 2011: 276. Zafar is mentioned by Pliny, *Natural History* 6.104, and also appears in the *Periplus*, §23.
- 197 Robin 2014b: 17.
- 198 The text is published in Robin and Rijziger 2018.
- 199 Philostorgius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.4. See too Robin 2014a; Dihle 1989; Bowersock 2012: 22.
- 200 Rufinus, *Ecclesiastical History* 10.9–10.
- 201 Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.38, trans. Hartranft.
- 202 Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.38, trans. Hartranft.
- 203 Malchus, *fragment* 1, trans. Blockley.
- 204 Socrates Scholasticus, *Ecclesiastical History* 7.18.
- 205 See Mayerson 1992 and Nappo 2015a. The location of Iotabe has yet to be conclusively identified.
- 206 Malchus, *fragment* 1, trans. Blockley.
- 207 Procopius, *Vandal Wars* 3.6.1.
- 208 Fisher and Wood *et al.* 2015: 287–8; see too Millar 2010a.
- 209 Jerome, *Life of St Malchus* 4, trans. Fisher.
- 210 Jerome, *Life of St Malchus* 5.3–10.2.
- 211 Hainthaler 2012: 31. The phrase ‘heirs of the promise’ is found in Cyril of Scythopolis’ story of Aspebetus (below).
- 212 Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.38, trans. Hartranft.
- 213 For a more detailed view see P. Schadler in Fisher and Wood *et al.* 2015: 367–72, as well as Millar 2005 and Millar 1993b.
- 214 Weingarten 2005: 180–1.
- 215 Lenski 2011.
- 216 Ps.-Nilus, *Narrations* 3.1, trans. Caner. See Ward 2015.

- 110 *Enemies, allies, and pretenders, AD 211–500*
- 217 Ammonius, *Relatio* 3–5. For these episodes see also Fisher and Wood *et al.* 2015: 292–6 and Trimmingham 1979: 253–5.
- 218 Cyril of Scythopolis, *Life of Saba* 14.
- 219 John Moschus, *The Spiritual Meadow* 99.
- 220 Jerome, *Life of St Hilarion* 16.1–12. See Millar 2010a.
- 221 Jerome, *Life of St Hilarion* 16.1–12, trans. Fisher.
- 222 The term coined by Elizabeth Key Fowden. See Fowden (EK): 2013.
- 223 Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.38, trans. Hartranft.
- 224 Despite the fact that Yazdegerd had previously acted in a friendly manner towards Christians, having presided over the synod of 410, by the end of his reign he was facing increasing challenges from the aristocracy that eventually resulted in his assassination. His actions against Christians were an attempt to address the uncertainty of his position. See Wood (P) 2012: 62–3.
- 225 Cyril of Scythopolis, *Life of St. Euthymius* 10.
- 226 Cyril of Scythopolis, *Life of St. Euthymius* 10, trans. Price.
- 227 Cyril of Scythopolis, *Life of St. Euthymius* 10, trans. Price. For Anatolius see *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire*, 2: 84 (Fl. Anatolius 10).
- 228 Cyril of Scythopolis, *Life of St. Euthymius* 10, trans. Price.
- 229 Cyril of Scythopolis, *Life of St. Euthymius* 10, trans. Price.
- 230 Cyril of Scythopolis, *Life of St. Euthymius* 10, trans. Price.
- 231 Syriac *Life of Symeon*, 77.
- 232 Trombley 1993: 171.
- 233 These bishops are discussed by Trimmingham 1979: 118–19.
- 234 See the discussion in Fisher and Wood *et al.* 2015: 296–300.
- 235 Antonius, *Life of Symeon* 29, trans. Doran.
- 236 Theodoret, *Life of Symeon* 13. See also *Life of Symeon* 16, containing the expected mix of miracle working and healing.
- 237 Theodoret, *Life of Symeon* 21. See also Antonius’ *Life of Symeon*, which records numerous stories of Arabs supplicating the saint, as at (for example) 17–18.
- 238 Syriac *Life of Symeon* 67.
- 239 Syriac *Life of Symeon* 67, trans. Doran.
- 240 Dauphin 1995; Fisher and Wood *et al.* 2015: 311–14.
- 241 Fisher and Wood *et al.* 2015: 311–14; on the identification of Mavia see Shahid 1984b: 222–4.
- 242 *IGLS* 2.297. See Fisher and Wood *et al.* 2015: 311–14; Feissel 2002: 213–4; Shahid 1984b.
- 243 The source history of the *Chronicle* is complex. For a detailed examination see Wood (P) 2013.
- 244 *Chronicle of Seert* = *PO* 5, pp. 310–13.
- 245 See Calvet 1998. For the late dating of these sites see Carter 2008 and the discussion in Payne 2011; see too the valuable assessments in Simpson 2018 and de Langhe 2008.
- 246 Cosmas, *Christian Topography*, p. 119; Trimmingham 1979: 303.
- 247 *Chronicle of Seert* = *PO* 5, pp. 330–1, discussed in Robin 2010a: 66.
- 248 These stories are discussed by Trimmingham 1979: 294–5.
- 249 Robin 2014c.
- 250 Robin 2010a: 65; Trimmingham 1979: 194–5.
- 251 See the full-length work of Toral-Niehoff 2013b, and Genequand 2015: 207–12.

- 252 See the discussion in Hoyland 2014: 272. See Howard-Johnston 2010: 128–37 for a discussion of the *Khuzistan Chronicle*.
- 253 See Wood (P) 2016; Toral-Niehoff 2013a; Talib 2013.
- 254 A poem by the late tenth-/early eleventh-century poet al-Sharif al-Radi, translated and discussed in Talib 2013.
- 255 Talib 2013: 135.
- 256 Musil 1927: 103.
- 257 Musil 1927: 287–8, diacritical marks omitted.
- 258 The evidence for these churches is reassessed in detail in Simpson 2018: 4–14.
- 259 Talbot Rice 1932a, 1932b, and 1934; Lecomte 2002. Talbot Rice had intended to continue work at al-Hira, but the end of Britain's mandate in Iraq in 1932 ended these hopes. See Simpson 2018.
- 260 See <https://maxvanberchem.org/fr/activites-scientifiques/projets/archeologie/11-archeologie/27-archaeological-survey-of-al-hira> (accessed February 6, 2019) and al-Kaabi 2012.
- 261 Talbot Rice 1934, discussed by Simpson 2018: 18; see also the discussion of al-Hira in Toral-Niehoff 2018: 66–7.
- 262 Toral-Niehoff 2013a: 117.
- 263 Trimmingham 1979: 189; Toral-Niehoff 2010: 336.
- 264 Rothstein 1899: 23–4; Trimmingham 1979: 156–7; on Hosea and Simeon see *Synodicon Orientale* pp. 616 and 676.
- 265 Trimmingham 1979: 199.
- 266 John of Ephesus, *Life of Simeon the Bishop* = PO 17, p. 140, trans. Brooks.
- 267 The *Life of Ahudemmeh* can be found in PO 3. For a discussion of the saint see Philip Wood in Fisher and Wood *et al.* 2015: 350–7.
- 268 *Chronicle of Seert* = PO 7, p. 133.
- 269 Wood (P) 2016: 799.
- 270 al-Tabari, 1.821–2.
- 271 Wood (P) 2014a: 5; Wood (P) 2016: 788. On the Ibad see Toral-Niehoff 2010.
- 272 This bowl is discussed by Simpson 2018: 18(translation by Simpson).
- 273 E.g. al-Tabari, 1.855; see also the *Farsname ibn Balkhi*, which records the Persian tradition. For an English translation and commentary of these texts see Munt *et al.* 2015. The story is also told by al-Yaqubi, p. 183.
- 274 Sipilä 2009 provides a highly detailed examination.
- 275 Fiema *et al.* 2015: 387; on Tayma see Eichmann 2009.
- 276 Gajda 2009: 53–8.
- 277 Masal 1 = Ry 509. See Robin 2015b: 144–5 and Robin 2014a: 46. Masal al-Jumh is not to be confused with al-Misal (Walan) in Yemen. See Schiettecatte 2011: 263–9.
- 278 Irafa 1. See Robin 2015b: 145.
- 279 Masal 1 = Ry 509. See Robin 2015b: 144–5 and Robin 2013: 214.
- 280 Robin 2013: 215.
- 281 Ibn Habib, *Kitab al-Muhabbar*, p. 368; al-Tabari, 1.880–2. For a detailed assessment see Robin 1996a.
- 282 It is worth noting here that the title of ‘king’ used on the inscription of Hujr is again likely a reflection of local authority, rather than a ‘true’ royal title. See Robin *et al.* 2014: 1120 and the discussion in Chapter 5.
- 283 Gajda considers the text to date to between the third and sixth century based on the way it is written. See Gajda 1996: 67. The text was ‘lost’ for some time due to a geographical

error, but was rediscovered in 2014 by Florent Egal. See Robin *et al.* 2014: 1117–9, and figs. 63 and 64, dating the inscription to the mid-fifth century.

284 See the discussion in Robin 2013: 236–7 and Gajda 1996.

285 Fiema *et al.* 2015: 387–8. For the Umm Jadhayidh text see Nehmé 2009 and *eadem* in Fiema *et al.* 2015: 419.

286 MB 2006 I54: see Robin 2013: 210–11 and 233–4.

287 See in detail Robin 2013, and his conclusions 240–2; Robin *et al.* 2014: 1052.

4 Arab statesmen in the sixth century

Introduction

Towards the end of the fifth century, Barsauma, the bishop of the city of Nisibis, sat down to pen a letter to Mar Acacius, the *catholicos* in Ctesiphon. The purpose of the letter—the text of which was copied into the *Synodicon Orientale*—was to explain to Mar Acacius why the bishop had been unable to get to a synod that the *catholicos* had organised. The problems, he said, were that:

For two successive years we have been afflicted by a shortage of rain and a lack of necessary commodities. The mob of the tribes from the south has assembled, and because of the multitude of people and their animals, they have destroyed the villages of the countryside and the mountain.¹

The raids, Barsauma continued, had involved widespread pillaging and the taking of captives, and this had gone on in both Roman and Persian territory. Eventually the local Roman commanders decided that they had had enough, and a force of Roman troops and Arab auxiliaries set out for the border region near Nisibis. This dangerous situation was defused by the diplomatic skills of the Persian governor of Nisibis, Qardag Nakoragan. After arranging for the return of stolen property to its rightful owners, he then invited the Roman field commander to a banquet. All seemed well, until, while the Romans and Persians feasted together, a group of Arab raiders with ‘four hundred horsemen’ made an audacious raid into Roman territory.²

It is clear from Barsauma’s account that the control exercised by imperial authorities over parts of the Arab population during this time was inconsistent. Worse, the actions of raiders threatened to bring Rome and Persia to war. After the feasting Roman commander and his officers learned of the raids, Barsauma said, they became ‘angry with us [the Persians], because they believed that this had been done in treachery by making them come into Nisibis, to cause damage to the Romans’.³ On occasion the patience of local commanders ran thin, and they took drastic action. For example, following a raid into Roman territory carried out by ‘the Persian *tayyaye*’, discussed by the anonymous author of Ps.-Joshua’s *Syriac Chronicle*, the governor of Nisibis rounded up the leading perpetrators and executed them.⁴ A corresponding excursion by ‘Roman *tayyaye*’ prompted a similar response from the Roman commander at Callinicum, Timostratus, who ‘apprehended five of their chiefs, killing two by the sword and hanging up three on gibbets’.⁵

Part of the problem was that Arab militias were encouraged to plunder as part of formal military campaigns. Ps.-Joshua explains that in AD 504/5, for example, the Roman army was

preceded by ‘the Roman *tayyaye*’ who pillaged the east bank of the Tigris and carried off everything they could find; the author laments that ‘this was the cause of much enrichment for the *tayyaye* of both sides, and that they did as they pleased in both empires’.⁶ These kinds of light infantry actions were a valuable way to soften up the enemy prior to the main attack. Clearly, however, granting the right to plunder in one situation—but then punishing the very fierce independence of action that helped to make Arab militia such useful assets—was not an approach that could last. The Romans, and to a lesser extent the Persians, needed a better policy for managing the frontiers. The solution they found was grounded in the long history of client management in antiquity, an extension of sorts of the ‘friendly king’ policies that had proved so effective in the Roman empire.

The idea of the ‘super-phylarchate’

The sources for the sixth-century Arabs are dominated by a small group of individuals. Gone are the myriad phylarchs and fleeting mentions of Arab chiefs who are then lost to history. Instead, we have a great deal of information about a family allied with the Romans, the Jafnids, who produced al-Harith (528/9–569/70), his brother, Abu Karib, and then al-Harith’s son, al-Mundhir (569/70–82), and al-Numan, the son of al-Mundhir. On the Persian side, the career of another al-Mundhir, whom we shall call Alamoundaros, lasted for half a century between 504 and 554. His descendants, Amr, Qabus, and another al-Numan, appear regularly in the sources. In the Arabian Peninsula, the family of Hujr of Kinda in the guise of another al-Harith (whom we shall call Arethas) and his sons and grandsons appear here and there.

The emergence of the so-called Jafnid family of Roman Arabs was a result of the Roman decision to abandon their reliance on the practice of allying a broad web of phylarchs with the *duces*, the military commanders in the provinces, and using them as a network both to counter Persian Arab raiding and to assist in military campaigns. Instead, in c. 528/9, Justinian threw his weight behind al-Harith, making him responsible for all of the other phylarchs, giving *him* the assignment to tackle these twin responsibilities. In Persia, the same sort of thing had already happened, perhaps as early as the fifth century, with the Alamundarus mentioned in Chapter 3. This type of arrangement can be called a ‘super-phylarchate’—a chief phylarch who had under his control all of the other phylarchs together with their militias, personally responsible to the emperor, and underwritten by royal authority.⁷

The Romans put a great deal of thought into the organisation of the super-phylarchate with an intricacy that was a departure from earlier practice. It is clear from the Latin translation of Novel 102 of the emperor Justinian that the position of phylarch, *iudex gentis* in Latin, was a functionary and part of the provincial bureaucratic structure, subject to legislation, rank, and punishment just like other officials regulated by law.⁸ Like other Roman officials, phylarchs were integrated into the state’s bureaucratic hierarchies through inclusion in the complex system of social grades used in late antiquity. The old senatorial ranks of *clarissimus*, *spectabilis*, and *illustris* had been reworked in the fifth century as the number of title-holders expanded; by the sixth century, only *illustris*, the top grade, retained the status of the older system, and membership of the *illustris* grade became a key career goal for the status-conscious Roman aristocrat. Furthermore, the reforms of Valentinian I (364–75) had moved the senatorial aristocracy away from a system based on birth to one based on office, thereby tying titles to positions. Without a formal appointment, for example, the son of a senator, no matter his father’s rank, would ‘reset’ to *clarissimus*, the lowest position on the ladder.⁹ By the time of Justinian, the senators themselves in Constantinople were only those holding the rank of *illustris*, and as a result it was necessary to divide *this* rank further into different

groups, known collectively as the *illustres*. Differentiating the *illustres* were the new ranks of *magnificentissimus* (Gr. *megaloprepestatos*), and *gloriosissimus* (Gr. *endoxotatos*). For a while, the *endoxotatoi* were the highest-graded members of the senatorial aristocracy, but later, *hyperphuestatos* (appearing in 489) and *famosissimus* (Gr. *paneuphemos*, first appearing in 497) were introduced as senior ranks to add additional grades for this elite group.¹⁰ Further complicating this already intricate picture was that *endoxotatoi* might differ in status from one another, depending on whether posts were active or honorary, or even where an individual resided—in the provinces, or in Constantinople, or one of the empire's other leading cities such as Antioch or Alexandria. For example, while al-Harith held the honorary position of *stratelatos* (*magister militum*), which came with the rank of *endoxotatos*, he did not outrank the *magister militum per Orientem*, who was charged with the actual leadership of the Roman army in the east.¹¹

The granting of honorific titles and offices for Arab phylarchs extended not only to *stratelatos* but also to *patrikios* (patrician) and *komes* (L. *comes*, i.e., count). The term *patrikios* (L. *patricius*) had been reintroduced during the time of Constantine 'as a mark of personal distinction', and was a regular feature of the late Roman aristocratic landscape. A novel issued by Justinian in 537 decreed that within the *illustres*, those holding the title of *patrikios* were senior to all others, although within this categorisation there was a further complex grading: for example, the leading magistrate of Constantinople held precedence over other *patrikioi*, including consuls and ex-consuls.¹² As a result, Arab *patrikioi* would have been at the bottom of this grade-within-a-grade, yet the various titles held by Arabs that appear in the literary and epigraphic sources were of great importance, granting al-Harith and his family entry to this new, late antique Roman aristocracy.¹³

Edict 4 of Justinian, dated to 536, reveals that the phylarch of the province of Phoenice Libanensis was given the grade of *lamprotatos* (L. *clarissimus*), while the *dux* of the province ranked above him with the grade of *peribleptos* (L. *spectabilis*). Both men ranked below the *illustres*, underscoring the importance of senior Arab phylarchs such as al-Harith being later graded within the *illustres* as *endoxotatoi*.¹⁴ Novel 102, mentioned earlier, awarded the rank of *peribleptos* to the new 'moderator' of the province of Arabia, stating that he did not rank below the *dux*, therefore implying that the *dux* held the same or higher rank. The date of this law was also 536. While the rank of the phylarch is not specified in Novel 102, Ariel Lewin has suggested that via analogy with Edict 4, it seems likely that al-Harith, who was phylarch of Arabia when elevated by Justinian, initially held the rank of *peribleptos*.¹⁵ Later, al-Harith would be awarded the honorific title of *stratelatos*, which generated a promotion in the *illustres* to *endoxotatos*, although the precise date of this change is unknown. As Geoffrey Greatrex has pointed out, the new arrangement by which all of the Arab phylarchs answered to al-Harith mirrored the relationship between the *duces* of the Roman provinces, who answered to the *magister militum per Orientem*. Placing al-Harith in the capacity of honorary *stratelatos* was therefore a bureaucratic courtesy that subordinated him to the *magister militum per Orientem*, while providing a clear and familiar organisational parallel for the junior phylarchs and the Roman officers in the provinces to follow.¹⁶ Over the course of the sixth century there was a 'general enhancement of the ranks of military commanders', and a late inscription from 580 records that the *dux Arabiae* held the rank of *endoxotatos*.¹⁷ This upward shift provides a further rationale for al-Harith's high rank and an explanation for the more senior rank of *paneuphemos*, which was later held by al-Harith's son, al-Mundhir.

According to Procopius, al-Harith also received 'the dignity of king', but it has never been entirely clear what this meant. Al-Harith is, though, recorded as *malik*, king, from a graffito in southern Syria (below), and so it is possible that Justinian permitted him to use this title

to differentiate himself from other Arab elites within his community, even if it did not reflect the official point of view of the authorities in Constantinople.¹⁸ Justinian also allowed other members of the family to be ranked: al-Harith's brother, Abu Karib, was given the rank of *endoxotatos*, and another individual sometimes thought to be related to al-Harith, Thalaba, received the rank of *lamprotatos*. Through this system, Justinian was able to grade the different family members in a clear manner and bind them to the interests and social structures of the Roman nobility.

Despite this evidence, it has long been questioned precisely how the phylarchate was structured internally and passed from one member to another. For many years, all that was known was that in November of 563, al-Harith travelled to Constantinople for an audience with Justinian to discuss who would succeed him, and this apparently allowed for an orderly transition in 569/70 when he died.¹⁹ However, in 2009, engineers improving road access to Amman's airport uncovered a number of structures at one of the mounds that make up the Tall al-Umayri archaeological site in the suburbs of the Jordanian capital (Figure 4.1). One of the buildings was a church devoted to St Sergius, a Christian Roman soldier who, with another, Bacchus, had refused demands to give up his beliefs and was martyred.²⁰ (More will be said of the remarkable Sergius, below). In the apse, preserved under layers of sand and debris, was a spectacular find: a mosaic inscription that recorded the building's dedication, mentioning al-Harith's son, al-Mundhir—a valuable addition to the corpus of Greek inscriptions dealing with the family of al-Harith, which are overwhelmingly votive/dedicatory or acclamations recording their visits to places of significance, such as monasteries. Notably, the majority of these texts are, like the inscription at Tall al-Umayri East, from Christian structures.

The church and the mosaic itself were first published in Arabic by archaeologists conducting the rescue work at Tall al-Umayri East,²¹ but unfortunately no detailed, high resolution photographs were taken. By the time that I was able to visit the site in 2013, the mosaic had been damaged by vandals. Fortunately, the text has been established from the original photographs, and has been carefully drawn by Aaron Styba.²² George Bevan has translated the inscription as follows (Figures 4.2 and 4.3):

Lord, receive the offering of the donor and the one who has created (this mosaic), [your servant] Mouselios along with his children.

Our Lord Jesus Christ, God of Saint Sergius protect the *megaloprepestatos* (*magnificentissimus*) Almoundaros, the *komes*.

God of Saint Sergius, bless your servant Eusebius along with his children.

God of Saint Sergius, bless your servant Ioannes along with his wife and children.

God of Saint Sergius, bless your servant Abdalla and Dionysios and S.....

In the time of the bishop Polyeuktos, the most beloved by God, the holy Martyrion of Saint Sergius was decorated with a mosaic floor by the zeal of Mari, son of Rabbos the most devout priest, and Georgios the Deacon, and Sabinus and Maria in the month of April at the time of the... [indiction]

The very last part of the text, which would have provided the date (via the indiction cycle) was damaged, probably in a later phase of occupancy at the site. It was hoped that the text could be dated by the mention of Polyeuktos, the Chalcedonian bishop of Philadelphia (Amman), but unfortunately the dates of his tenure are unknown. Nevertheless, the Tall al-Umayri inscription provides invaluable information about the structure of the super-phylarchate. The second line of the text mentions 'Alamoundaros', that is, al-Mundhir, the son of al-Harith, who succeeded his father and became chief phylarch in 569/70. In the Tall al-Umayri inscription



Figure 4.1 Aerial view of the church at Tall al-Umayri East and the engineering works that helped to uncover it. Image # APAAME_20101002_SES-0277. Photographer: Stafford Smith, courtesy of Aerial Photographic Archive for Archaeology in the Middle East (APAAME).

al-Mundhir holds the rank of *megaloprepestatos*, a middling grade in the *illustres* that clearly subordinated him, as a young man, to his more prestigious *endoxotatoi* father and his uncle, Abu Karib. He also held the position of *komes* (L. *comes*), that is, ‘count’, a military title tied to the rank of *megaloprepestatos* that, like al-Harith’s title of *stratelatos*, was honorary rather than an official position.²³

What the Tall al-Umayri inscription provides, then, is a snapshot of how the Romans intended the super-phylarchate to function between different generations. A likely point in time for al-Mundhir to be ‘confirmed’ and given the title and rank that appear in the text would have been al-Harith’s audience with Justinian in 563. Al-Mundhir was, as *megaloprepestatos komes*, marked for succession early on; and, on taking over from al-Harith, al-Mundhir was promoted in line with the general inflation of titles discussed above, presumably to ensure that as super-phylarch he ranked above a provincial *dux* and the other phylarchs, but did not outrank the military commander on the battlefield, the *magister militum per Orientem*. A letter written in 569/70 records al-Mundhir as *patrikios*, without any mention of a rank in the *illustres*, but later on he was advanced to *paneuphemos*.²⁴ Like al-Harith’s advancement to *endoxotatos*, the date of al-Mundhir’s promotion is not known, but it must have been between



Figure 4.2 The church at Tall al-Umayri East, showing the apse. The mosaic lies between the two columns, under the sand. Photograph by the author.

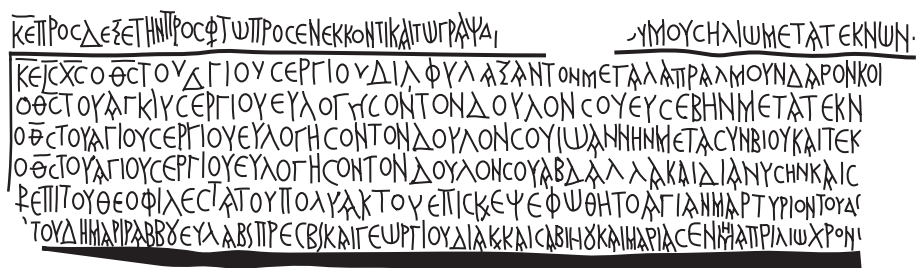


Figure 4.3 The mosaic inscription. Illustration by Aaron Styba.

570 and 578, when a building was erected at al-Hayyat in the Syrian Hauran; its owners recorded its construction ‘in the time of the *paneuphemos* and *patrikios* Alamoundaros’.²⁵ The building is a large residence surrounding an internal court, and it is possible that it performed some kind of military function or some other purpose connected to the activities of al-Mundhir.²⁶ Travelling to Constantinople in 580 at the invitation of the emperor Tiberius II, al-Mundhir received further honours, including the right to wear a diadem, and his sons were awarded the rank of *endoxotatos*, with one also becoming *stratelatos*. Al-Mundhir was exiled two years later, but had his career followed its natural course, it is likely that one of his ‘confirmed’ sons—probably the one who held the additional honorific of *stratelatos*, who was probably the al-Numan who appears on an inscription from (?) Maarrat al-Numan in Syria as *endoxotatos*, phylarch, and *stratelatos*—would have taken over in his stead.²⁷ The different titles and grades assigned to this family (with the assumption that Thalaba was a member) can be usefully summarised, as follows, and the individual inscriptions, texts, and archaeological sites are discussed further in this chapter:

<i>Name</i>	<i>Title/Grade</i>	<i>Source</i>
Thalaba	<i>lamprotatos</i>	inscription: Nitl: <i>SEG</i> 51: 2071-2072; undated
al-Harith	<i>patrikios</i>	text: Malalas, <i>Chronicle</i> , 18.148/p. 496, AD 563 text: <i>Documenta</i> , letter 39 text: Theophanes, <i>Chronicle</i> AM 6056/p. 240, AD 563 inscription: Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharbi: <i>IGLS</i> 5 2553 D, undated
	<i>endoxotatos</i>	inscription: Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharbi: <i>IGLS</i> 5 2553 B, undated
	<i>stratelatos</i>	inscription: Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharbi: <i>IGLS</i> 5 2553 B, undated
Abu Karib (brother of al-Harith)	<i>endoxotatos</i>	inscription: Samma, <i>SEG</i> 43.1089/ <i>IGLS</i> 13/2: 9843, undated
al-Mundhir (son of al-Harith)	<i>patrikios</i>	inscription: al-Burj, <i>Wadd.</i> 2562c, undated inscription: al-Hayyat, <i>Wadd.</i> 2110 = <i>IGLS</i> 16: 628, AD 578 text: <i>Documenta</i> , letter 41, sub. 121, AD 569/70 text: John of Ephesus, <i>Ecclesiastical History</i> , 3.4.39–42, AD 580
	<i>paneuphemos</i>	inscription: al-Burj, <i>Wadd.</i> 2562c, undated inscription: al-Hayyat, <i>Wadd.</i> 2110 = <i>IGLS</i> 16: 628, AD 578
	<i>megaloprepestatos komes</i>	inscription: Tall al-Umayri East, undated
al-Numan (son of al-Mundhir)	<i>endoxotatos</i>	inscription: Tall al-Umayri East, undated inscription: (?) Maarrat al-Numan, <i>IGLS</i> 4: 1550
	<i>stratelatos</i>	inscription: (?) Maarrat al-Numan, <i>IGLS</i> 4: 1550
unnamed sons of al-Mundhir	<i>endoxotatos</i>	inscription: al-Burj, <i>Wadd.</i> 2562c, undated

Choosing a single Arab leader to control the rest was an intelligent decision, and bringing al-Harith and his family into the Roman nobility gave them more of a stake in the concerns of the empire than might otherwise have been possible. The decision was also pragmatic. Procopius clearly states that the elevation of al-Harith was born from frustration with the inability of the existing system to counter Persia's own super-phylarch, Alamoundaros. Procopius said that this man:

was most discreet and well experienced in matters of warfare, thoroughly faithful to the Persians, and unusually energetic—a man who for a space of fifty years forced the Roman state to bend the knee.²⁸

Indeed, he was proficient at pillage and plunder, and earned a grim reputation for slaving, extortion, and even human sacrifice. Try as they might, the Romans could not counter him, and when they did manage to catch up to him following one or other of his incursions, 'this barbarian would fall upon his pursuers... and would rout and destroy them with no trouble'.

One of his most successful ventures involved capturing a couple of Roman generals, ransomed off handsomely after a delicate negotiation.²⁹

Procopius identifies the leading position of Alamoundaros as central to his ability to raid Roman territory at will. As a super-phyllarch himself, Alamoundaros could marshal significant resources and was personally trusted by the Persian king to keep the Romans off balance, and could be used at times as a sort of deniable agent. Early in his career he had impressed Kavadh, who turned to Alamoundaros when 'he felt confidence in no-one else' and could not decide on the right course of action, and he retained the king's trust throughout.³⁰ Al-Harith, then, was the Roman answer to Alamoundaros—a plan to match like with like. Eventually it was al-Harith who gained the upper hand in this contest, killing his rival in battle in 554, but not before one of his own sons had been 'sacrificed to Aphrodite' as he was tending to horses in a field.³¹

Before al-Harith, 500–528

Where did al-Harith come from? The answer to this question is far from clear. Procopius says that he was the son of 'Gabalas', also known as Jabala, the figurative patriarch of the dynasty that included al-Harith and al-Mundhir. Hardly anything is known about Jabala, including whether or not he had held a phyllarchate or even where he came from. A Gabalas is known from the sources, and one of the letters dealing with the Najran episode (below) was apparently addressed to 'Jabala, king of the Assanites', but otherwise the career of al-Harith's father is lost to obscurity.³²

Both the *Chronicle* of Theophanes and the *Ecclesiastical History* of Evagrius contain descriptions of the difficult security situation in the eastern provinces around the turn of the sixth century, that threatened Euphratesia (the late antique name for Commagene and the Euphrates valley, as it stretched eastwards towards Raqqa), Mesopotamia, and the Phoenician, Arabian, and Palestinian provinces. Both writers cite 'Scenite' or 'tent-dwelling Arabs' as the cause, noting that regular units of the Roman army were needed to suppress the raids.³³ Some, Theophanes says, were Persian-allied Arabs, 'of the tribe of the phyllarch Naaman', a reference to the Arabs of al-Hira.³⁴ Others included Ogaros, i.e., 'Hujr', 'the son of Arethas' (another al-Harith), a reference to the leaders of Kinda discussed in the previous chapter. Theophanes says that this Arethas was also known as 'the son of Thalabene', linking Arethas with the Thalabite Arabs who occasionally appear together with the tribe of Mudar on Himyarite inscriptions, such as the text referring to a raid into Persian territory in AD 521 (below).³⁵ Finally, there was Gabalas, who fled the determined assault of the Roman general Romanus and then vanished from the sources. One result of these campaigns was that the Romans regained the island of Iotabe and restored its taxation business to the Roman state.³⁶

Detailed as the account of Theophanes is, it leaves a great number of questions. The raids appear to be a jockeying for power of sorts between the different groups of Arabs, alongside the reassertion of Roman authority in the Gulf of Aqaba. The beneficiary of all this appears to have been Arethas, son of Thalabene, who in a later section of Theophanes' text concluded a treaty with Euphrasius, the patriarch of a three-generation diplomatic dynasty active in the late fifth and early sixth centuries.³⁷ This Arethas is clearly the same individual whom Theophanes had mentioned earlier, since his son, Ogaros, also appears, along with another son, Badicharimos, a Hellenisation of the Arabic name Madikarib.³⁸ Meanwhile, Theophanes says that once Anastasius (491–518) had settled matters with Arethas, 'all of Palestine, Arabia, and Phoenice enjoyed much peace and calm'.³⁹ The apparent placement of

multiple provinces under a single individual looks very much like a tentative first attempt at a super-phyllarchate, well before Justinian refined the arrangement in 528/9.

The Arab-Islamic sources provide a slightly different and more detailed viewpoint of this crucial early period. Ibn Habib tells of a migration of Ghassan, the tribe usually associated with the Roman empire in the sixth century via al-Harith and al-Mundhir, who were believed to hail from Ghassan's Jafnid clan. According to Ibn Habib's account, Ghassan forced their way into the territory of Salih, another tribe who may have been Rome's principal *foederati/hypospondoi* at some point in the fifth century, but who are not known from any Roman source. A dispute over the arrangements for Ghassan's settlement led to an armed confrontation in which Ghassan were victorious; in the aftermath, Ibn Habib says, the (unnamed) emperor concluded a treaty with the Ghassanid leader, whose name was Thalaba.⁴⁰ Fleshing out this story is the account of al-Yaqubi (d. c. 905), who also says that Salih were the dominant Arab force in Syria before the arrival of Ghassan; the latter moved into the region during the reign of 'Nushir', perhaps a reference to Anastasius. Several disputes followed which led to a brief war, and a treaty was agreed whereby the emperor accepted that Ghassan would be ruled by their own kings (a similar idea, perhaps, to Procopius' 'dignity of king', given to al-Harith). The king they chose was Jafna, who gave his name to the 'Jafnids'.⁴¹

The different and competing stories make it difficult to untangle exactly what happened after the skirmishes and border wars of the early sixth century. The discovery of an inscription from the region around Eilat, in Israel, referring to 'Thalaba the king', however, has allowed a very tentative form of concordance to be established between the Roman and Arab-Islamic sources. From the way it is written, the inscription can be dated to the end of the fifth century, and Christian Robin has argued that this Thalaba is the same as the father of the Arethas, 'son of the Thalabene', mentioned by Theophanes. The inscription also mentions Adi, son of Thalaba, but he does not appear in any other source, perhaps because he was not the eldest and did not inherit or otherwise continue his father's authority. Instead, Thalaba's position passed to Arethas, and thence to Arethas' sons Ogaros and Badicharimos, the latter of whom may have participated in the Himyarite expedition of AD 521 (below). Robin considers Thalaba to be a member of Ghassan, but not of the specific family branch that would produce al-Harith and al-Mundhir. It is unclear what relationship should be inferred with the family of Hujr of Kinda, usually thought to be related to Arethas; much therefore remains speculation.⁴²

Whatever the precise case, it is clear that the emperor Anastasius (if we follow the Roman sources) responded in an entirely pragmatic way to these disturbances by arranging a treaty that safeguarded Rome's interests and assigned duties to his new allies. They were quickly needed. In Persia, the king, Kavadh, had been locked in a life-or-death struggle for the throne; at one point, he was even forced to flee to the Hephthalite Huns, one of Sasanian Persia's mortal foes. Sensing an opportunity, the Huns promoted Kavadh's candidacy and he regained the throne in 499, but in conditions that left a hefty debt due to his protectors. A request to Anastasius for a loan was rebuffed, and war between Rome and Persia quickly followed in 502.

Kavadh brought with him al-Numan, his key Arab ally at the time. While Kavadh besieged the Roman fortress city of Amida (Diyarbakir), al-Numan harried the countryside around Edessa, raiding to great effect and keeping the Roman forces there tied down. At the beginning of the winter of 502, al-Numan plundered the districts around Harran, capturing thousands of villagers who were out in the fields bringing in the grape harvest. In addition to the human plunder, who could be sold in slave markets or held for ransom, al-Numan rustled cattle and stole 'goods and spoil of all kinds'.⁴³ This was a form of terrorism, used to great effect

to undermine Roman military efforts and sow doubt amongst the villagers and city-dwellers about the Roman army's ability to safeguard their livelihoods. As Ps.-Joshua pointed out at the beginning of this chapter, it also greatly enriched the perpetrators, and al-Numan would have had a plentiful bounty to redistribute to his followers, enriching them and cementing his position as a great lord who could provide for those under him.

Al-Numan, however, did not have long to celebrate his achievements. Anastasius marshalled a new army in 503, and it immediately scored a success against the Persian Arabs, defeating them somewhere on the Khabur river in eastern Syria.⁴⁴ Supporting the Roman effort was a group of 'Roman *tayyaye*', described in Ps.-Joshua's text as 'the Thalabites', further suggesting that these were troops under the command of Arethas, son of Thalabene, who had concluded a treaty with Euphrasius.⁴⁵ The Roman Arab forces made for 'Hirta'—a reference either to al-Hira, or more simply to the camp of al-Numan's forces—plundering, killing, and pillaging. Following a lull in fighting and looking for revenge, Kavadh set his sights on Edessa, which would have been a magnificent prize. At this point in his narrative Ps.-Joshua inserts a Christian Arab, one of al-Numan's retinue, who argues vociferously against the planned attack. The reason, he says, lies deep in the legend concerning king Abgar's correspondence with Christ, who promised the Edessan ruler that the city would be forever inviolate. The presence of a Christian in al-Numan's army would not, as we have seen, be too much of a surprise. Less believable is the fate of al-Numan after he threatened Edessa 'and spoke blasphemous words'. His skull swelled up, and he died in his tent two days later.⁴⁶

Kavadh immediately replaced al-Numan. It is possible that the replacement was Alamoundaros, but there would be a discrepancy of about a year, so it is also possible that someone else filled the position in the meantime or that this was the moment of the Kinda 'interregnum' at al-Hira (see below).⁴⁷ Whatever the exact sequence of events, it was not long before Alamoundaros took over and made his mark. Cyril of Scythopolis wrote in his *Life of John the Hesychast* that 'Alamundarus'⁴⁸ son of Sikika⁴⁹ had been named king of all the Persian Arabs, and he opened his account with a dramatic raid into the provinces of Arabia and the Palestines. The raids netted yet more prisoners and sowed terror amongst the rural monasteries, which, in their solitude and isolation from larger, better protected areas, were vulnerable to a determined attack.⁵⁰ The Romans seemed powerless to prevent his forays; even an optimistic attempt in 512/13 by two Monophysite bishops to 'convert' the Persian Arab leader to Christianity was undone by Alamoundaros' intellect and sense of humour. In response to their earnest entreaties, he informed his stunned guests that, 'I received a letter today telling me that the archangel Michael was dead'. Outwitted and perplexed, the bishops retreated, their mission in vain.⁵¹

Alamoundaros' raids possessed an important political dimension. A perennial sticking point between the Roman and Persian leaders was the cost of guarding the Caucasian passes, the main routes that gave entry from the north into the Persian empire. The Persian position was that since the Romans benefitted from the efforts of Persian troops, and the physical obstacles of fortresses and walls in that area, they should help pay for it. It was not unusual for the Persian kings to demand gold for this purpose, and Kavadh did just this shortly after Justin I (518–27) came to the Roman throne. He reinforced his request by letting Alamoundaros loose on Roman territory, essentially threatening a sort of protection racket. In one raid Alamoundaros apparently got as far as Emesa and Apamea, taking back with him 'four hundred virgins' from Emesa, and sacrificing them right away to the goddess Uzzai.⁵² Not long after this Alamoundaros scored a spectacular success by seizing Timostratus, a leading military officer in the Roman wars between Anastasius and Kavadh, and another,

named John. A chastened Justin was forced to negotiate for their release, which was obtained through the mediation of the Roman diplomat Abrames, the son of Euphrasius (and father of the future diplomat Nonnosus), together with Sergius, bishop of the city of Rusafa, during a meeting at Ramla, near al-Hira, in 524.⁵³

Aksum and Himyar: Najran, 523

While he was at Ramla, Alamoundaros received another diplomatic mission, sent by Joseph, king of Himyar. Events had moved quickly in South Arabia: in c. 500, Himyar had rapidly fallen under the control of its Christian neighbour, Aksum, and Jewish kings were replaced by Christian appointees subordinate to the Aksumite kings. A large, imposing stela from Aksum, written in Geez (the liturgical language of the Aksumite kingdom), records one of the campaigns of Kaleb Ella Asbeha, Himyar's conqueror, who enthroned his nominee Marthadilan Yanuf (500–15) and 'founded a sanctuary in [Himyar]... filled with zeal for the name of the Son of God'.⁵⁴ After a brief interregnum, Marthadilan was succeeded by the staunchly Christian Madikarib Yafur. Christian rulership in Zafar aligned Himyar's interests with those of Aksum, and therefore to those of Rome, and in 521 Madikarib launched an expedition that reached southern Iraq, with Arab auxiliaries from Mudar and the 'Thalabite Arabs' (above). An inscription from Masal al-Jumh, dating to the late spring of 521, confirms that the expedition's target was 'Mudhahir', that is, Alamoundaros of al-Hira.⁵⁵ Robin has suggested that this mission could be connected with the capture of Timostratus and John by Alamoundaros, as an effort to mete out punishment against Alamoundaros or gain leverage for negotiations. The political situation in South Arabia had dramatically swung in Rome's favour, and Justin perhaps now felt that there was sufficient clout to lean on Madikarib and persuade him to take action.⁵⁶

As striking as this shift in political fortunes was, there was to be another violent twist. Madikarib Yafur died at some point in 521/2, and Kaleb selected a man known as Joseph to succeed him. The new king, who took the title 'king of all the communes', was also known as Dhu Nuwas, Dounaas, Yusuf, and Masruq. (Norbert Nebes considers that the choice of Yusuf, borrowed from Hebrew and otherwise rare in South Arabia, signalled the abrupt reversion to Himyarite Judaism that was to come).⁵⁷ Initially compliant with his Aksumite patrons, Joseph quickly turned against them in a savage rebellion in late 522. The Aksumite garrison in Zafar was butchered and their church sacked, and Joseph then led an army into the southwest of Yemen, burning and pillaging as he went. Vivid testimony is found in the Syriac *Chronicle* of Ps.-Dionysius, who states that the Jews of Himyar 'in bitter wrath slew and destroyed all the Christian people there, men, women, young people and little children, poor and rich'.⁵⁸ After fortifying likely crossing points to ward off the inevitable Aksumite counter attack, Joseph then sent one of his deputies, a Jewish noble from the dhu-Yazan, to lay siege to the oasis of Najran with its large Christian community.

Tension between Christians and Jews in South Arabia was not new; in the 470s, a Christian priest named Azqir was executed with the approval of a rabbi with whom he had quarrelled.⁵⁹ Other indications of a growing rift between the Najrani community and the leaders of Himyar are, perhaps, provided by the recent epigraphic discoveries at Hima, near Najran. Many of these texts were written in an early form of the Arabic script, hitherto only known from examples in Syria (more is said on this in Chapter 5). This decision to use the Arabic script has been interpreted as an ideological choice, a conscious rejection of the South Arabian script used by the Jewish kingdom of Himyar. The use of Arabic, instead, aligned the Najrani community more closely with its Arab co-religionists further north. Furthermore, at least

one of the Hima inscriptions used the dating system of the province of Arabia, and, as noted in Chapter 3, many are explicitly Christian in nature; the calendar months that appear in the texts are also different from those used in Himyar. It is possible that this development had been made possible by an intermediary, such as the leaders of Kinda, who had cultivated deeper contacts with the Romano-Persian world to the north (including Christians at al-Hira) and within whose territory (via Madhhij) Hima lay.⁶⁰ The murder of Azqir and the Christian texts from Hima might therefore preserve a snapshot of a steady divergence between the Jewish Himyarites and the Najrani Christians. The events that unfolded in the first quarter of the sixth century, however, would represent a new and destructive phase in the relationship between the two communities.

By 523 Joseph's agent, Sharahil Yaqbul dhu-Yazan, had cut off Najran and penned its population inside the city. Joseph then arrived to take personal charge of proceedings. A large inscription dating to July 523 and authored by Sharahil, found at the watering holes of Hima, stands in mute testimony to what transpired next. The text says that Sharahil joined with Joseph 'when he burnt the church and massacred the Abyssinians at Zafar', and then, with ample support from the communes and Arab allies, Sharahil 'positioned himself against Najran' and took a huge amount of plunder and booty. The inscription is meticulous in its detail, recording 12,500 Najrani dead, and that this single expedition took thirteen months to complete.⁶¹ Two other inscriptions of Sharahil are known, one also at Hima, another some thirty kilometres to the north. In the late autumn of 2014 another inscription was found that recorded the size of the Himyarite army as 12,000, far fewer than the 120,000 that appears in some of the Christian accounts of the massacre.⁶²

The Christian traditions concerning Najran had a long afterlife in Syriac hagiography and perhaps even left a mark in the Quran.⁶³ The Syriac texts include the so-called *Book of the Himyarites*, together with several letters attributed to Simeon of Beth-Arsham (Chapter 3), the prominent Monophysite missionary who took delight in engaging in rhetorical sparring matches with Nestorian Christians in Persia.⁶⁴ The textual history of Simeon's letters is complicated: two letters known as 'Letter 1' and 'Letter 2' were published by Irfan Shahid, and there is also a short text known as 'Letter C'.⁶⁵ This last text found its way into the *Chronicle* of Ps.-Dionysius, together with that of Ps.-Zachariah; it is also found in the late *Chronicle* of Michael the Syrian. Years of research have cast doubt on whether Simeon had anything to do with writing 'Letter 2', and this and 'Letter 1' do not seem have been written by the same person who authored *The Book of the Himyarites*; neither was Simeon the author of the *Book*. Scholarly interest has thus focused on 'Letter C' as the most reliable source for what happened at Najran. Its best-preserved form is to be found in the text of Ps.-Zachariah.⁶⁶

'Letter C' was written to the bishop of a place called Gabbula, in Syria, and in it Simeon provides a first-hand testimony of Joseph's diplomatic mission to Alamoundaros at Ramla, near al-Hira. Simeon and his entourage were already at Ramla when Joseph's emissary arrived and read a letter that boasted of the king's pogrom against Christians in Himyar and his execution of Christian priests. He goes on to say that the church of the Aksumites in Zafar that he had sacked had been rededicated as a synagogue, before he went on to deal with the Christians at Najran. Joseph, the letter states, swore an oath to the Christians, and they came out of Najran to meet him in the belief that they would be safe. Relishing in his duplicity, Joseph, the messenger read, 'seized them and forced them to bring their gold, their silver, and their possessions'. The king then went to look for their bishop. Finding out that he was dead, Joseph dug up the corpse and desecrated the body, before going on a killing spree that murdered many of the Christians, including a certain Arethas, whose hagiography, the *Martyrdom of Arethas*, became famous across the Middle East.⁶⁷ Both 'Letter C' and the

later text of al-Tabari report that Joseph gave the Najrani Christians the option of death or conversion to Judaism. It is al-Tabari who adds the famous detail that when they chose death, he ordered a large trench to be dug for them, and then he:

burnt some of them with fire, slew some violently with the sword, and mutilated them savagely until he had killed nearly twenty thousand of them. Out of them there escaped only one man, called Daws Dhu Thalaban, on one of his horses, who travelled through the sands until he threw his pursuers off.⁶⁸

While Daws escaped, one of the Najrani dead was apparently (a very elderly) Abdallah b. Thamiir, who, according to al-Tabari, had played a role in introducing Christianity to Najran (Chapter 3).⁶⁹

One thing that is of great interest about this episode is the reaction of Alamoundaros' followers at Ramla when Joseph's messenger recounted the news of what had happened at Najran. Alamoundaros, who showed scant regard for Christians when on campaign against the Romans, seemed initially to be swayed by the messenger and demanded that his soldiers 'deny Christ'. Yet the opposite occurred: one of his officers, who 'was an important and renowned man and was courageous in battle', stood up for the Christians in the ranks and refused his king's orders. Alamoundaros took no action, a response that reflected the growing importance of Christians at al-Hira.⁷⁰ In the end, Joseph failed to rally any support for his actions amongst the Hiran Arabs. On the contrary, Simeon's heartfelt plea to the bishop of Gabbula that the Aksumite and Roman authorities should become involved netted results; an Aksumite invasion, possibly supported by the Roman navy,⁷¹ swiftly toppled Joseph and restored Christian rule in Zafar. In al-Tabari's narrative it is Daws Dhu Thalaban, not Simeon, who obtained this intervention, but the result was the same.⁷² Aksumite punishment followed in the form of an anti-Jewish pogrom. A badly damaged slab found at Marib, containing an inscription written in Geez, apparently records the vengeful Aksumite expedition led by Kaleb and the expedition is also recorded by Procopius,⁷³ while an inscription dated to 530, recording upgrades to the fortifications at Qani, show that post-conquest operations carried on for several years.⁷⁴ Tales of Joseph's end reverberated throughout the Arab-Islamic tradition. In the history of al-Tabari, he met his death bravely, riding his horse into the sea until he vanished forever.⁷⁵

Al-Harith and Alamoundaros

Justinian—one of the most influential figures of late antiquity—came to the throne following the death of his uncle, Justin (Figure 4.4). Justinian gained a reputation as a prodigious builder, although much of this has to do with the panegyric text *Buildings*, written by Procopius. Nevertheless, during Justinian's reign Roman defences were strengthened throughout the Middle East, and, most famously, work began on the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople. Justinian also pursued an aggressive foreign policy, launching ambitious campaigns against the Vandals in Africa and the Ostrogoths in Italy.

In the east, Justinian soon faced a new Persian emperor, Khusrau I Anushirvan, 'Immortal Soul', who came to the throne after Kavadh died in 531. The two emperors squared off on numerous occasions, providing the Arabs of both states ample opportunity to raid, pillage, and win fame on the battlefields across the Middle East (Figure 4.5).

The raiding of Alamoundaros had continued apace after the conference at Ramla. In 529, he reached the territory of Antioch, before being forced to withdraw by a Roman counteroffensive, although he managed to escape with a large number of prisoners.⁷⁶ The Romans



Figure 4.4 Gold solidus of Justinian. On the obverse, a helmeted bust of the emperor, holding a globus cruciger in his right hand; a shield is over his left shoulder. On the reverse, a standing angel holding a staff in the right hand, globus cruciger in the left. Note the missing “CONOB” mint mark expected in the exergue. Private collection.

stepped up their operations along the frontier with Persia, and Belisarius, for many years Justinian’s key general in both his eastern and western campaigns, began work on a fortification near Thannuris (Tunainir, near Hasakeh in Syria).⁷⁷ Just as the Persians had attempted to forestall work at nearby Dara, an imposing fortress built during the reign of Anastasius, so they harried and harassed the Romans around Thannuris. Ps.-Zachariah recalls one particular engagement, led by Belisarius and a number of other Roman commanders. The Romans were defeated, and in the process a certain al-Tafar (Atfar), ‘king of the *tayyaye*... an experienced man of war... well trained in the technology of the Roman [military] and famous everywhere’ was killed as he joined the frenzied withdrawal to Dara.⁷⁸ Al-Tafar also appears as a phylarch in the *Chronicle* of John Malalas, where he is known by the Greek name Tapharas.⁷⁹ Unfortunately, nothing else is known of this individual and he becomes another Arab leader, like Mara al-Qays, apparently famous to all in his own time, but leaving only a fleeting imprint in the literary or epigraphic records (Figure 4.5).

At around the same time (528/9), Arethas, the ‘son of the Thalabene’ who had made a treaty with Euphrasius during the reign of Anastasius, was killed in battle. Arethas had fallen out with a Roman commander, Diomedes, and fled into the desert, where he succumbed to an ambush laid by Alamoundaros. The back story to this event is murky. The Arab-Islamic tradition asserts that Arethas had given his daughter, Hind, in marriage to Alamoundaros, linking the leading clan at al-Hira with Arethas, Kinda, and therefore Maadd. The appearance of ‘Madaye’ in Letter C, mocking Simeon and his entourage as they entered the camp at Ramla, is a tantalising piece of information that hints at the otherwise invisible inter- and intra-tribal connections typically ignored by Graeco-Roman historians. If the Arab-Islamic tradition is correct, it is possible that troops from Maadd were under Alamoundaros’ control as a result of the dynastic links between his family and that of Arethas. These links could also explain the oft-held belief that there was a period of Kindite rule at al-Hira (an ‘interregnum’) although precisely when, and by whom, has never been clearly established.⁸⁰

Whether Alamoundaros callously dispensed with his father-in-law or simply took the opportunity to eliminate a rival tribal leader, Justinian was sufficiently concerned to send out a combined army of Roman *duces* from a number of provinces, together with their phylarchs; in the list, alongside ‘Gnouphas’ and ‘Naaman’, we find Arethas, that is, al-Harith, shortly to

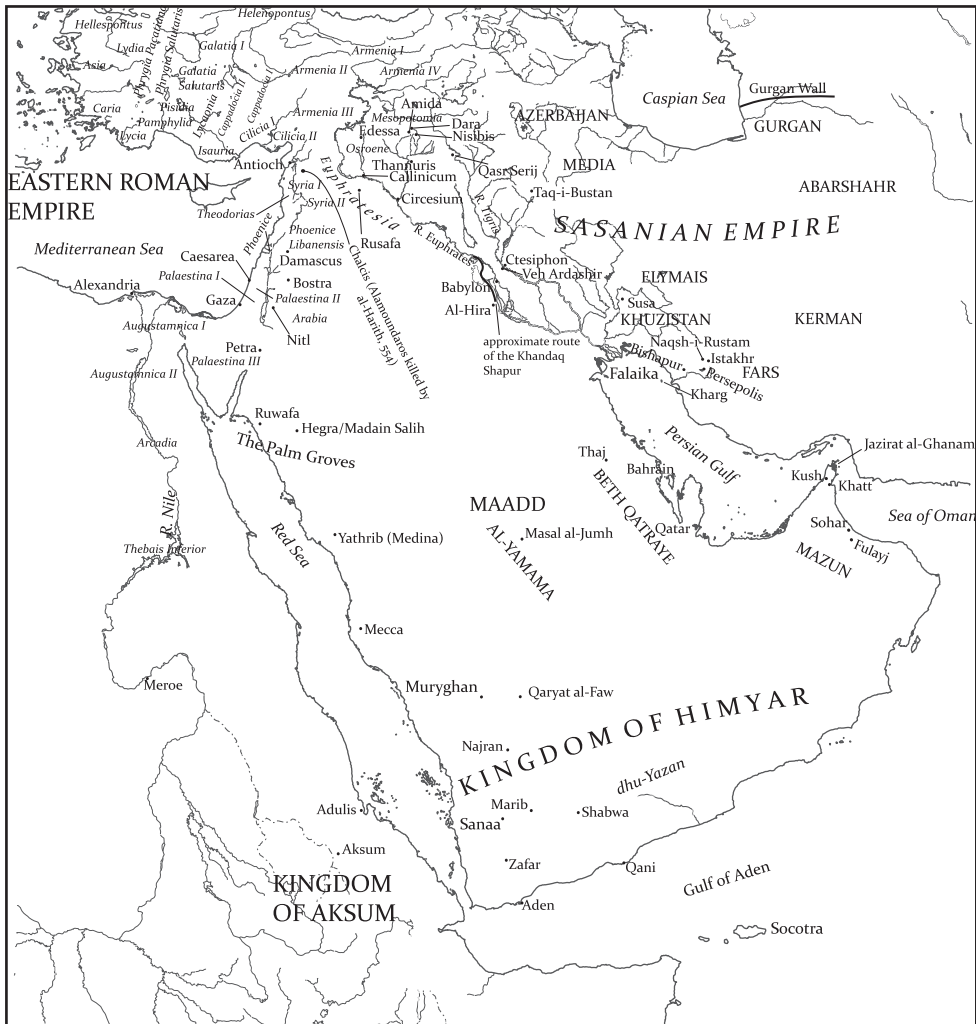


Figure 4.5 The Middle East during the time of Justinian. Note the profusion of provinces in the Roman east. Illustration by the author.

be made the super-phylarch by Justinian. According to Malalas, the expedition was a success and involved the sack of several Persian fortresses, the capture of numerous prisoners, and plunder in the form of camels ‘and other animals of various kinds’.⁸¹ Another unnamed Arab phylarch (but perhaps Abu Karib, the brother of al-Harith) was involved in the successful suppression of the Samaritan revolt in 529.⁸² Still, Justinian wanted better results—specifically, he wanted Alamoundaros, and to this end, he elevated al-Harith as described at the beginning of this chapter. In retrospect Justinian made an inspired choice, but it also clear that he was taking a risk. Cyril of Scythopolis records a feud between al-Harith and another phylarch, Asovades, which resulted in a period of dangerous conflict.⁸³ This event is dated to sometime in the 550s, showing that al-Harith’s control over his subordinates was not always a foregone conclusion.⁸⁴

As noted earlier, Justinian allowed al-Harith the ‘dignity of king’. This phrase may be related to the use of the Arabic word *malik* to describe al-Harith. The evidence for this title comes from Jabal Says, a dramatic location in the desert featuring two extinct volcanos some distance to the southeast of Damascus. A seasonal water supply in a depression, a *khabra*, made this bleak location habitable for some of the time, and a later Umayyad residence sits near the *khabra*, adjacent to some late antique structures.⁸⁵ The liminal character of Jabal Says is not unlike al-Namara, which was also at the very edges of Roman settlement, and where occupancy and use of the site was very much dependent on the local availability of water provided by the favourable geographic conditions (Figures 4.6, 4.7, and 4.8).

Numerous graffiti can be found all around the crater’s edge, which provides a commanding view of the nearby countryside, and Antoine Poidebard, who photographed much of Syria’s Roman remains in the 1930s under the French Mandate, detected what he believed to be a Roman road running nearby.

Amongst the thousands of graffiti, an early Arabic inscription was discovered written by one ‘Ruqaym son of Maarif the Awsite’, who said that he had been dispatched by ‘al-Harith the king [*malik*]’ to Jabal Says (‘Usays’) to act as a ‘frontier guard’. Fortunately for historians, Ruqaym had the presence of mind to write down the year. For a long time this was read as 423, according to the annexation of the province of Arabia, which provides a date of 528, contemporary with al-Harith’s rise from local phylarch to super-phylarch of the eastern provinces; more recently, Robin has proposed that the date should be read as 427, providing a date of 532/3, also contemporary with the early part of al-Harith’s career.⁸⁶

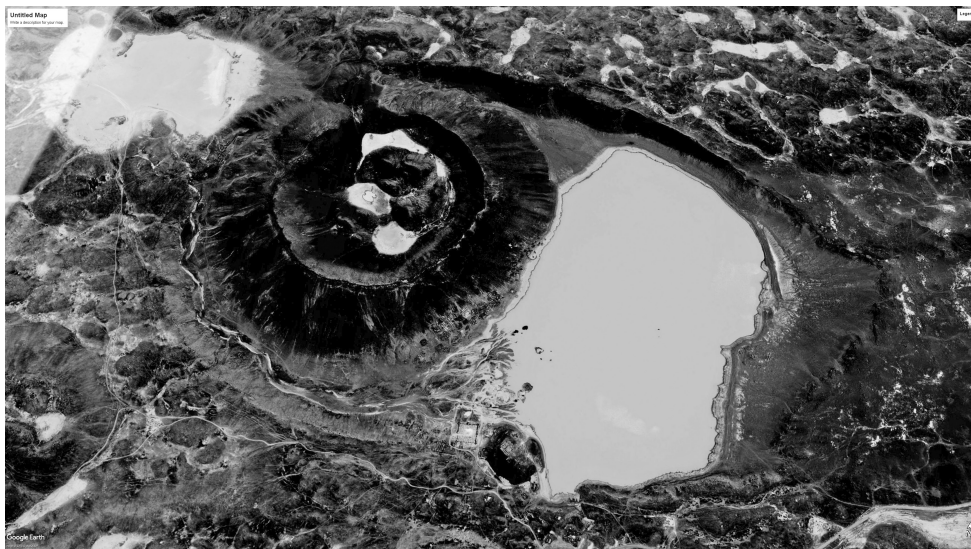


Figure 4.6 Google Earth Pro image of Jabal Says, taken in March 2011. The water-filled *khabra* next to the crater is clearly visible. In the bottom right of the picture the later Umayyad palace is visible, and to the north, on the slopes of the volcano, a late antique settlement. The inscription referring to al-Harith was discovered along the crater rim, higher up. © 2019 CNES/Airbus, © 2019 DigitalGlobe.



Figure 4.7 Jabal Says, viewed from the east, showing the *khabra* adjacent to the crater. The road identified by Poidebard is visible in the centre of the picture. Pl. XCIII from Poidebard 1934. © Éditions Geuthner.



Figure 4.8 Jabal Says, ground view showing the dominant crater and the Umayyad residence in the foreground. Photograph by the author.

While members of the family would also be called king (MLK) in Syriac texts, neither al-Harith nor al-Mundhir are ever known by this title in a Greek text or inscription, lending credence to the idea that it was purely intended for their immediate subordinates.⁸⁷

Greatrex has suggested that in addition to addressing the problem posed by Alamoundaros, Justinian was thinking more broadly when he created the super-phylarchate. Plans were already afoot for the conquests in the Mediterranean, and the situation in South Arabia had stabilised due to the aggressive response of Kaleb to the activities of Joseph and his court. Justinian may have imagined a broad swathe of territory under Roman influence, stretching from the deserts of Syria and Arabia, throughout the western part of the Arabian Peninsula, the Red Sea, and into South Arabia itself. Such a strong position, combined with Justinian's proactive strengthening of Roman defences throughout the Middle East, would represent a formidable counterweight to the Persians.⁸⁸ Support for this view is provided by Procopius and also by the account of Nonnosus, the grandson of Euphrasius.⁸⁹ Nonnosus' work was one of the books read by Photius, who included a somewhat confusing digest of it in his *Bibliotecha*.

Procopius dates Justinian's efforts to the reigns of Kaleb, and his appointee over Himyar as the successor to Joseph, a man named Sumuyafa Ashwa.⁹⁰ Procopius says that Justinian sent an ambassador named Julianus⁹¹ to both Kaleb and Sumuyafa Ashwa, with the message that both Aksum and Himyar 'on account of their community of religion should make common cause with the Romans in the war against the Persians'.⁹² Here is one of the clearest statements in any ancient source of the political dimension of a shared faith: as all three states were Christian, even though the Aksumites were not Chalcedonians, they should share the struggle against those who were not.

Justinian's plan had two ambitious elements. In the first, the Aksumites should purchase as much silk as they could and sell it to the Romans, who at this point were obliged to buy most of it from the Persians. Buying silk through this process put gold in the Persian treasury,

and Justinian wanted this to stop. Secondly, Julianus passed on the emperor's wish that the Himyarite king should make some adjustments to his client policy in *Arabia Deserta*. This involved placing one 'Caïsus' (Qays) in control of Maadd, and with the manpower of this vast central Arabian group, invade the Persian empire. Procopius says that Caïsus 'was by birth of the captain's rank', which suggests that he was a phylarch or had inherited a phylarchate. At this particular moment, however, he was on the run from Sumuyafa Ashwa, as he had killed one of the king's relatives.⁹³ (Notably, elsewhere Procopius demonstrates clear knowledge about Maadd and their relationship with the Himyarites, although he tarnishes his precision somewhat by including a mention of the 'man-eating Saracens').⁹⁴ According to Procopius, both Kaleb and Sumuyafa Ashwa promised to do what Justinian wanted, but then carried on as they had before. The reasons were not hard to find: with their geographical advantage, the Persians tended to buy up all the silk at its point of production, and so there was little that the Aksumites could buy on behalf of the Romans, and the Himyarites balked at being asked to make a dangerous trans-desert crossing only to face the battle-hardened Persian army without the benefit of Roman support.

A different account is provided by the intrepid Nonnosus, whose journey was plagued by 'the treacherous attacks of tribesmen [and] perils from wild beasts'.⁹⁵ In addition to travelling to Aksum and Himyar, the target of Nonnosus' mission was also Kaisos (Caïsus/Qays) who in Nonnosus' text is a Saracen phylarch and related to the Arethas who had concluded a treaty with Euphrasius. Previously, Abrames, Nonnosus' father, had visited Kaisos and taken his son, Mavias, to Justinian as a diplomatic hostage.⁹⁶ Nonnosus reports that Kaisos was phylarch of both Kinda and Maadd, a situation that agrees with the political arrangements made by the Himyarite kings (Chapter 3). Yet Kaisos, under a cloud in the text of Procopius, appears in a rather more positive light here, and rather than being placed in control of Maadd, he was to be taken to Constantinople to meet with Justinian. These two discrepancies can be resolved by placing the mission of Nonnosus later than that of Julianus, but questions remain about what had taken place in the interim.⁹⁷ Despite the positive spin applied by Nonnosus (or Photius in his digest), little appears to have been accomplished by Nonnosus. Later, however, after Nonnosus' father Abrames was sent south once again, Kaisos did finally end up in Constantinople, and was made phylarch of Palestine, after leaving his brothers Ambrus and Yezid in his former occupation in central Arabia. Through this action, Justinian had wrested from Himyar the responsibility of nominating the rulers of Kinda and therefore Maadd, a diplomatic coup that strengthened Rome's position in the region and may have been intended to fracture any dynastic relationship between Kinda, Maadd, and al-Hira.⁹⁸

Malalas, who had access to Nonnosus' account, makes a strange mention of a diplomatic mission carried out by an unnamed ambassador sent to the Aksumite king Kaleb. The ambassador delivered gifts and a letter demanding war against Kavadh, thus placing the embassy prior to 531. Malalas says that an immediate declaration of war followed and Kaleb set off at once, but this viewpoint does not match the account of Aksumite lassitude described by Procopius.⁹⁹ More convincing is the description by Procopius of the appointment of al-Harith's brother, Abu Karib, to the phylarchate of Palestine, presumably prior or subsequent to Kaisos/Qays. Abu Karib gave Justinian a tract of land called The Palm Groves, which Laila Nehmé suggests corresponded to the oases of the Hijaz, including the city of Hegra in North Arabia. In reality, of course, Abu Karib administered these on behalf of the emperor, a fact that Procopius freely acknowledges.¹⁰⁰ The later appearance of an emissary of Abu Karib on a mission to Abraha of Himyar (below) illustrates that while Justinian had concentrated phylarchal power around al-Harith, he clearly maintained a high-ranking 'deputy' from the same family, presumably to support his brother, to take over immediately if al-Harith became

ill or died, or even, especially given his grade of *endoxotatos*, to act as a rival power bloc to balance al-Harith.¹⁰¹

In 531, al-Harith had his first opportunity to fight Alamoundaros. That spring Kavadh sent an army up the Euphrates. With the Persians was Alamoundaros, who reached Callinicum (Raqqa).¹⁰² After some initial skirmishes and the capture of several towns by the Persians, the main force of the Roman army brought their enemy to bay along the southern bank of the Euphrates. The date was April 19, 531: Easter Saturday, and the Christians amongst the Roman soldiers were fasting, which no doubt contributed to their poor performance as they quickly got the worst of the encounter, even though one of Alamoundaros' sons was killed in the *mêlée*.¹⁰³ There are conflicting reports about the performance of al-Harith and his troops. Malalas says that while some of the Arabs fled, al-Harith himself stayed with part of the force and continued to fight.¹⁰⁴ Procopius, on the other hand, blamed al-Harith for the Roman defeat. He says that the Persians concentrated their strength on the right wing of the Roman army, which was held by al-Harith and his men. Without offering any resistance, Procopius asserts, 'they broke their formation and moved apart, so that they got the reputation of having betrayed the Romans to the Persians'.¹⁰⁵ It is likely, however, that Malalas based his account on the official enquiry into the debacle at Callinicum, which temporarily cost Belisarius his job—while al-Harith kept his.¹⁰⁶ Nevertheless, it was an inauspicious beginning for Justinian's new method of managing his Arab allies.

Fresh from the victory at Callinicum, Alamoundaros bolstered his reputation further by ransoming the remaining captives that he had taken in an attack on Antioch some years earlier. The survivors, some of whom had witnessed their group receiving rough treatment, including beheadings, petitioned Alamoundaros to allow them to contact Roman authorities so that their freedom could be purchased. Ephrem, the Chalcedonian patriarch of Antioch, led the contributions, which eventually covered an entire carpet.¹⁰⁷ Some good news finally came for Justinian when the new Persian king, Khusrau I, signalled that he was amenable to discussing a peace deal. The 'Eternal Peace' was quickly broken, however, and it would not be long before the two states went to war. Once again, Alamoundaros was at the forefront of Persian plans.

By 539, Khusrau had become determined to find a way to break the Eternal Peace. Procopius says that he had become jealous of Justinian's successes against the Vandals in North Africa, and the inroads Belisarius was then making in Italy against the Ostrogoths. Due to the Eternal Peace, an invasion led by either himself or a Persian general was out of the question, so he turned to Alamoundaros. After discussing the matter with Khusrau—it is worth mentioning again the remarkable personal access these Arab elites had to Persian and Roman leaders—Alamoundaros came up with the following plan: he would fabricate a complaint against al-Harith concerning an obscure set of 'boundary lines' in the desert, claiming that he had been wronged, and therefore justify an armed incursion into Roman territory. The 'boundary lines' in question comprised an area of barren pasturage south of Palmyra, and in his defence, al-Harith managed to produce some elderly men who could claim that before either he or Alamoundaros were born, the area had belonged to the Romans. Alamoundaros countered with the claim that the 'owners of the flocks' had given him the pasturage, adding, artfully, that his actions did not break the Eternal Peace, because the Saracens had not been included in it. It is notable that there were not, apparently, any Roman troops in this area, leaving Alamoundaros free to stir up trouble without breaking the treaty.¹⁰⁸ At this point Justinian stepped in by asking a senior aristocrat, Strategius, and Summus, the brother of the ambassador Julianus, to find a peaceful solution.¹⁰⁹

Al-Tabari preserves a version of this same story, but one which likely drew on a Persian source. In this account, it is al-Harith who invaded Persian territory, specifically targeting

Alamoundaros and wreaking 'great slaughter among his subjects', plundering and pillaging at will. Khusrau demanded restitution for this from Justinian, who took no action; where both al-Tabari and Procopius agree is on the lack of any sincere response from Constantinople. Strategius and Summus dragged proceedings out, and Khusrau accused Justinian of trying to buy off Alamoundaros. In the end, probably out of sheer frustration, Khusrau invaded the Roman empire anyway, in 540.¹¹⁰

Part of Khusrau's campaign included an assault on the fortress city of Sergiopolis, which had been home to a Roman military garrison since the time of the Tetrarchy.¹¹¹ It is worth making a brief digression about the site, as both it and the cult sanctuary it sheltered were central to the growing power of al-Harith and his son. Sergiopolis, also known by its Arabic name, Rusafa, provided water (the massive cisterns there remain impressive), shelter, and acted as a crossroads of commerce, culture, and information in a hostile and unforgiving desert location south of Callinicum and the Roman fort at Sura on the Euphrates. Sergiopolis took its name from the martyrdom of St Sergius, which had taken place there, and, as early as 431, Alexander, bishop of Hierapolis, financed a church at Rusafa in honour of the martyr¹¹² (Figure 4.9).

The emperor Anastasius had brought Sergius' thumb to Constantinople and honoured Sergiopolis by upgrading its status to that of a metropolitan see, and briefly named the city Anastasiopolis.¹¹³ In Constantinople, Justinian and Theodora lavished funds on an ornate church to St Sergius and his fellow martyr St Bacchus, and the imperial couple also honoured Sergiopolis, dedicating a sumptuously decorated cross to the shrine of the martyr, soon to be stolen by Khusrau (below).¹¹⁴

In common with many other saints and cults, the veneration of St Sergius was an international phenomenon; in addition, the cult was particularly popular with Arabs. The hagiographer of the Persian bishop Ahudemmeh, for example, said of St Sergius that 'the Arabs love his name and go to him more than any other people'. Severus, patriarch of Antioch (512–38), gave a homily on St Sergius during which he noted the attraction of the cult to Arabs around Rusafa, while the Arab-Islamic tradition contains numerous references about the importance of the cult to Arab tribes.¹¹⁵ Theophylact referred to St Sergius as 'the most efficacious [saint] in Persia', and his celebrity there rivalled that in the Roman empire.¹¹⁶ In c. 565, the energetic Ahudemmeh even went as far as to create a rival centre of Sergius worship at Qasr Serij, sixty kilometres northwest of Mosul in Iraq and on an ancient road to Nisibis, and then added a monastery there called Ain Qenoye.¹¹⁷ Later, the bishop of Tikrit, Maruta (629–49) would follow Ahudemmeh's precedent and establish a monastery of St Sergius between Tikrit and Hit that became 'a harbor in the wilderness carefully chosen for its well-watered location'.¹¹⁸ David Oates, who examined Qasr Serij in the 1950s, highlighted Khusrau's interest in the Sergius cult and his extensive support for the church complex; when the monastery was burned by a Nestorian mob, Khusrau stepped in to help with its reconstruction.¹¹⁹ Oates made the intriguing suggestion that Qasr Serij might have been able to perform a function similar to that of Hatra—a desert/rural sanctuary where the Persian government could exercise a form of 'secular control over the tribesmen who worshipped there'. In her landmark work on St Sergius, Elizabeth Key Fowden reinforces this idea, noting that the distance between Beth Arabaye and Rusafa, the factor cited by Ahudemmeh in his decision to establish Qasr Serij, poorly concealed his true intentions, which were to control the movements of Arab tribes in the area, an act that would also be of benefit to the Sasanian king.¹²⁰

Devotee of the cult he may have been, but in 542 Khusrau was plotting larceny: he set his sights not only on the city but also on the treasures related to the cult itself, including the valuable cross mentioned above and 'the all-holy relics of the victorious martyr Sergius which



Figure 4.9 The fortress of Rusafa-Sergiopolis, viewed from the air, looking southwest. The basilica of St Sergius is the large building in the top-left of the space enclosed by the walls; the al-Mundhir building lies outside the city walls at the bottom-right of the image, just beyond the ornate northern gateway. Pl. LXXV from Poidebard 1934. © Éditions Geuthner.

lay in one of the oblong coffins which is covered in silver'.¹²¹ Khusrau did manage to make off with the cross, but soon found that Rusafa, like Edessa, was protected by higher powers. A Christian in the army of Alamoundaros, who had accompanied Khusrau, found out that the Sasanian king intended to enter Sergiopolis to search for treasure, and then, once inside its imposing walls with a suitable force of soldiers, capture it as a *fait accompli*. Creeping across the no-man's land between the Persian camp and the fortress, he called out to the defenders and revealed the Persian king's intended deception. The account of Evagrius offers the detail that when he saw 'myriad shields' on the wall, Khusrau realised that he was up against St Sergius, not just the Romans. In the end the Persians, running out of water, moved on.¹²² Not long afterwards, with both sides weary, a truce and financial settlement were agreed in 545.¹²³

While Alamoundaros had been acting on Khusrau's orders in his effort to provoke al-Harith and bring about a conflict that would justify Persian intervention, it was also clear that he had considerable leeway about how to go about this task. Al-Harith, as chief phylarch, was also granted a degree of flexibility in his response. This 'loosening' of oversight, an inevitable consequence of the devolution of royal authority onto these two individuals, became progressively more noticeable during the war and its aftermath. In 541, for example, Belisarius, after pushing past Nisibis, had sent al-Harith ahead with over a thousand elite Roman troops accompanied by two confidants, an officer named Trajan and another called John the Glutton.¹²⁴ The objective was to raid, harry, and destroy, but al-Harith amassed so much plunder that he ignored orders to report on enemy troop movements and return to the Roman camp. Worried that Belisarius might relieve him of some of his loot, al-Harith sent Trajan and John back to Roman territory by a different route, while sending messengers to Belisarius with a misleading report of an impending Persian invasion.¹²⁵

Later, not long after the truce was agreed in 545, al-Harith and Alamoundaros continued their feud without either Roman or Persian support. This represented a new phase in the independence of Arab militias and their leaders: previously, even while, for example, Alamoundaros raided Roman territory with his own troops, he did so to fulfill Persian political goals, and more often than not, Alamoundaros found himself alongside Persian troops as part of the king's campaigns. This time, however, Procopius makes it a point to state, specifically, that the two leaders fought each other 'by themselves, unaided by either the Romans or the Persians'. During one of these skirmishes, Alamoundaros captured a son of al-Harith, whom, Procopius alleges, he sacrificed to Uzzai; in a subsequent conflict that involved 'their whole armies', al-Harith drove Alamoundaros from the battlefield and came close to avenging the death of his son.¹²⁶

In addition to his military duties, al-Harith had, in the 540s, started to get involved in church politics and in the life of individual church communities, and the family would become prominent supporters of the cult of St Sergius. The complex of churches and ancillary buildings at Nitl, near Madaba in Jordan (Figure 4.10), offer an early portrait of al-Harith's activities. In the centre of the nave of the second (southern) church, dedicated to St Sergius, a mosaic inscription was discovered that called for the salvation of a *lamprotatos* phylarch named Thalaba, 'son of Audelas'; the name 'Thalaba' evokes Roman Arab connections, although little else is known of this individual (it is unlikely to be the Thalaba known from the inscription in Israel, mentioned earlier).

Another inscription invokes 'Eretha son of Al-Aretha', which is normally accepted to be a reference to a son of al-Harith. Of Eretha himself nothing is known, although he could, feasibly, be the unnamed son killed in action in 545. Fr Michele Piccirillo, whose team excavated the site, considered the tesserae of the mosaics contemporary to those at Madaba and dated them to the first half of the sixth century, a date consistent with the early part of al-Harith's



Figure 4.10 Part of the ecclesiastical complex at Nitl, as it appeared in February 2011. Photograph by the author.

career.¹²⁷ Intriguingly, an underground tomb (hypogea), part of the original construction, was found in the southern church close to the mosaic mentioning Thalaba, leading to suggestions that the church was intended as a final resting place for at least one member of the Roman Arab nobility.¹²⁸ On the other hand, Pierre-Louis Gatier considers that these inscriptions are commemorative of those donating to the foundation of the church, rather than being funerary texts, although this does not mean that members of the family were not, later, buried there.¹²⁹

In addition to the cult of St Sergius, al-Harith became involved in the affairs of the Monophysite community. The hagiography of the Monophysite bishops Jacob Baradeus and Theodore, written by John of Ephesus—himself a prominent Monophysite bishop, but also a missionary for Justinian¹³⁰—assigns al-Harith a leading role in lobbying the empress Theodora to address the lack of bishops for the Monophysite faithful.¹³¹ Theodora was, on occasion, sympathetic to the Monophysites, and was remembered favourably for this after her death. Al-Harith's son, al-Mundhir, became even more involved with the Monophysites than his father, and it has been suggested that the key positions that al-Harith and Theodora hold in John's text reflect the greater esteem given to both the empress and the Jafnid family later on.¹³² John reports that Theodora responded to the lack of bishops in 541/2 with the ordination (in 542/3) of Jacob Baradeus as bishop of Edessa (although this was an itinerant or roving bishopric)¹³³ and Theodore either for Bostra or for the '*hirta* of the *tayyaye*', a possible

reference to Jabiya in Syria, a site connected with al-Harith and al-Mundhir and home to a church of St Sergius.¹³⁴ Jacob, 'with sacred swiftness and leonine confidence', would consecrate an astonishing twenty-seven new bishops for the Monophysites, along with numerous priests and patriarchs. (John of Ephesus was himself one of the bishops ordained by Jacob).¹³⁵ For his part, Theodore's appointment represented a continuation of sorts of the Parembolè model discussed in Chapter 3—'mapping episcopal structures onto nodes of Arab authority to project a bishop's ministry deeper beyond the zone of urban settlement, and thereby providing a 'fixed point' that could be exploited for political purposes'.¹³⁶

Another later 'manicured' view of al-Harith's support for the Monophysites is provided by Michael the Syrian (who preserves the work of Cyrus of Batna, a close contemporary of John of Ephesus), imagining a rhetorical sparring match in which the patriarch Ephrem attempted to 'seduce' al-Harith from Monophysitism to Chalcedonian orthodoxy. For his efforts Ephrem was served a dish of camel meat, which he balked at; al-Harith used this 'unclean food' to demonstrate the distaste he himself held for the Chalcedonians. After refusing both to bless the table and then eat the food, Ephrem withdrew, defeated.¹³⁷

A more contemporary viewpoint of Arabs and the Monophysite community in the Roman empire is provided by Leontius of Jerusalem's *Testimonies of the Saints*, which identified the role of itinerant Monophysite bishops in ministering to travelling Arab populations. Interestingly, this is exactly the sort of role conceived for Theodore, and, to a lesser extent, Jacob himself.¹³⁸ Another important contemporary source is provided by a collection of Syriac Monophysite documents, known as the *Documenta*, probably put together at some point towards the end of the sixth century.¹³⁹ A number of the documents address one of the major theological concerns of the time, the Tritheist heresy, whose adherents went far beyond Nestorianism to imagine a different substance and nature for each of the Trinity.¹⁴⁰ Two Monophysite bishops, Eugenius of Seleucia and Conon of Tarsus, had been reeled in by its ideas, and needed to be brought back from the brink. Document 39 in the collection states that 'the Christ-loving and glorious *patrikios*' al-Harith attempted to negotiate with the rebellious bishops, and al-Harith went as far as to organise a summit in the province of Arabia to deal with the problem.¹⁴¹ The documents addressing these events appear to date to 569, and at some point before his death al-Harith was in Constantinople, again to find a solution to the challenge posed by Eugenius and Conon (document 40).¹⁴² Perhaps the most important of all the documents relating to al-Harith is the letter (document 23) that he sent to Jacob Baradeus from the Roman capital, in 563. (It is not clear how many trips al-Harith made to the capital, and it is possible that this visit served to address the Eugenius/Conon issue as well as to confer with Justinian over his succession). The letter, which deals with the election of a patriarch for Antioch, has been translated by Fergus Millar who notes that its routine nature only underscores the degree to which al-Harith had become associated with church matters. It remains the only piece of surviving correspondence authored by an Arab leader from this period.¹⁴³

Document 41, also known as 'The letter of the Archimandrites', is a piece of correspondence addressed by 137 Monophysite clergymen to Jacob and eleven others as a confirmation of faith in the context of the problem posed by Tritheism.¹⁴⁴ Subscription no. 121 of this letter records al-Harith's son al-Mundhir as the 'Christ-loving *patrikios*, Mundhir', providing the earliest date for his patrician status.¹⁴⁵ Subscription no. 119 refers to a monastery called, in Syriac, HLYWRM. A 'Heliarama' is known from the *Peutinger Table*, and is usually identified with the site in the desert west of Palmyra known as Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharbi.¹⁴⁶ This site, covering some 200 hectares, included an Umayyad palace (its best known feature, as its ornate gateway forms the façade of the National Museum in Damascus); a *khan* dated to AD 727,

during the reign of the Umayyad caliph Hisham b. Abd al-Malik; and an elaborate hydraulic system that brought water from the massive Roman-era Harbaqa Dam, seventeen kilometres away, to fill a cistern and nourish a large network of fields.¹⁴⁷ There are several pre-Umayyad ruins at the site, including a large rectangular tower, which, not being contiguous with the palace building, are thought to be all that remains of the late antique monastery (Figures 4.11 and 4.12).¹⁴⁸ Qasr al-Hayr sat astride the main Roman road between Qaryatayn and Palmyra, which can be clearly seen on Google Earth.¹⁴⁹ Excavations at Qasr al-Hayr uncovered a lintel, re-used inverted in a doorway, with five separate panels featuring four Greek inscriptions that contained two references to al-Harith. One, panel 4 (Figure 4.13), records ‘when the *endoxotatos* Arethas the *stratelatos* was phylarch’, while the other, panel 1 (Figure 4.14), is an invocation to ‘[Flavius]¹⁵⁰ Arethas, *patrikios*’, and seems to record a visit by al-Harith to the monastery. The inscription would probably have been placed at the spot where he was officially welcomed.¹⁵¹ The identification between Qasr al-Hayr and Heliarama is strengthened by the mention of one ‘Sergius’, who may be the same individual who appears in subscription no. 119 as ‘presbyter and head of monastery of HLYWRM’.¹⁵²

The lintel texts are undated, although for some time a date of 559 was read at the end of one of the inscriptions.¹⁵³ The reference to a time when al-Harith was phylarch, rather than a more conventional dating system such as an indiction cycle, the tenure of an emperor, or even a local bishop, is further evidence of al-Harith’s importance in regional affairs. Rather than seeing this is an indication that he was somehow outside of normal epigraphic conventions, however, it is better to see it as an indication of al-Harith’s acculturation and assimilation to the societal, cultural, and political norms of the time.¹⁵⁴

Notably, the Monophysite monasteries that appear in ‘the letter of the Archimandrites’ are predominantly rural, and when placed alongside the epigraphic records for al-Harith and his son, the evidence reveals a large rural zone in the province of Arabia and spreading into nearby provinces, dotted with churches and monasteries, many of which could claim a link

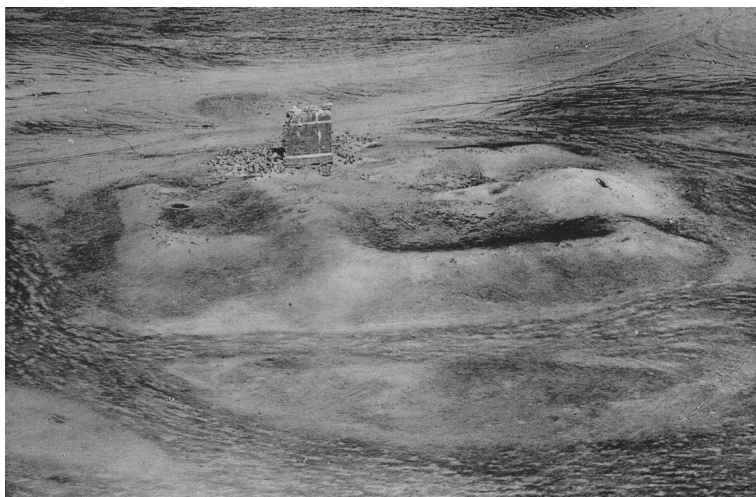


Figure 4.11 Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharbi, prior to excavation. The structure at centre is the tower shown in Figure 4.12. Pl. XXV from Poidebard 1934. © Éditions Geuthner.



Figure 4.12 The late Roman tower at Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharbi. Photograph by the author.

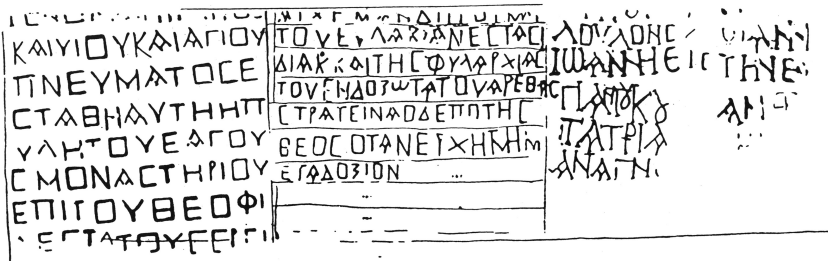


Figure 4.13 Part of the inscribed lintel from Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharbi, indicating Panel 4 (centre: *IGLS* 5.2553B) from Schlumberger 1986: 26. Used with permission of the Institut Français du Proche Orient (Ifpo).

with the Arab leaders of the day, and which, furthermore, were bases for Monophysite clergy during times when the Chalcedonian grip on urban sees was powerful.¹⁵⁵ Gatier has suggested, for example, that the acclamation to al-Harith at Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharbi represented a correspondence between the (super-) phylarchate and the monastic and ecclesiastical authorities.¹⁵⁶ Mark Whittow suggested that the *Documenta* was best regarded ‘not as direct

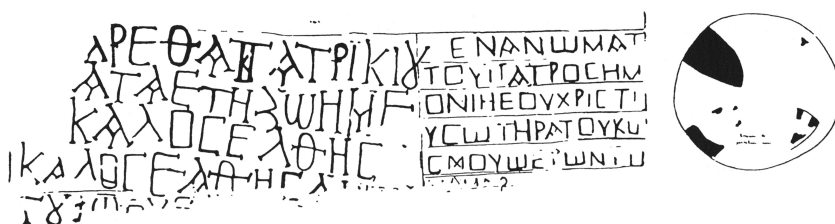


Figure 4.14 Part of the inscribed lintel from Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharbi, indicating Panel 1 (far left: *IGLS* 5.2553D) from Schlumberger 1986: 26. Used with permission of the Institut Français du Proche Orient (Ifpo).

evidence for Jafnid attitudes, but as evidence for how the Syriac-speaking non-Chalcedonian community imagined the Jafnids [the family of al-Harith] and what they looked for from them'.¹⁵⁷ It is clear that the community saw them as powerful intercessors who possessed the political influence to intervene with higher authorities than would otherwise be possible. Jacob Baradeus, for example, had the moral authority to intercede in Constantinople, but al-Harith and his son possessed something more valuable—namely, a direct, personal, and heritable link to the imperial throne that stretched back to the early years of Justinian's rule. For the community, al-Harith and al-Mundhir could, and would, do far more where it mattered than Jacob Baradeus could achieve.

Al-Harith's brother, Abu Karib, also earned recognition amongst the Christian communities of the region. A Greek inscription from Samma in Syria calls on 'Lord God of St George' to 'protect the *endoxotatos* phylarch Abu-Chirib'.¹⁵⁸ The use of *endoxotatos* without any additional titles, such as *komes* or *stratelatos*, would rank Abu Karib in the same category as a provincial *dux*, after the 'enhancement' of military grades discussed at the beginning of this chapter.¹⁵⁹ Snapshots of Abu Karib's career also come from the Petra Papyri, where a text records the participation of the phylarch 'Aboucherebos', mediating the sale of a vineyard in c. 574.¹⁶⁰ Another mention of Abu Karib is found in a Syriac codex from a monastery close to Palmyra. The text makes reference to 'the days of the holy and devout bishops, Mar Jacob and Mar Theodore', that is, the two bishops mentioned in the hagiography from John of Ephesus discussed above. Jacob died in 578, so the text must date to some time prior to that; a part of it calls for the support of 'Our Lord [who] might show his compassion to King Abokarib', apparently for certain 'errors', although these are not specified. The Syriac word for 'king' is *MLK*, similar to the *malik* used in Arabic texts like the inscriptions at Jabal Says or that of Hujr (Chapter 3).¹⁶¹

Abraha

Whilst al-Harith battled Alamoundaros and mediated in ecclesiastical disputes, political changes had been afoot in South Arabia. Sometime after 531, the Aksumite appointee to the Himyarite throne, Sumuyafa Ashwa, had been overthrown by a man named Abraha, sometimes thought to be the son of a slave from Adulis in Aksum. Kaleb Ella Asbeha tried twice to oust Abraha, but failed on both occasions, and as he strengthened his rule, Abraha took pains to portray himself not as an Aksumite dependant, but as a king of Himyar, ensuring, for example, that the inscriptions made during his reign were in the Sabaic language. Like his

predecessor, he was a Christian, as his numerous inscriptions show, although these texts also show that Abraha's Christology was guided by the political realities of Himyar, where a large percentage of the nobility had espoused Judeo-Monotheism for many generations. In line with those realities, Abraha aligned himself more closely with Syrian Christianity, distancing himself from Aksum—Aksumite Christian loanwords were replaced with terms derived from Syriac, for example, on Abraha's inscriptions.¹⁶² Keen to consolidate his position on the international stage, Abraha arranged a diplomatic conference at Marib in 547, to which delegates of Aksum, Rome, and Persia were invited, with Aksum and Rome ranked above the Persians, a reflection of shared Christian ties and Abraha's unavoidable links with the Aksumite kingdom. On the other hand, by ranking Aksum and Rome equally, Abraha simultaneously tried to underscore his political independence from his former master across the Red Sea.¹⁶³ As an inscription of Wazeb, son of Kaleb Ella Asbeha, shows, the Aksumite king still claimed lordship over parts of South Arabia, while Procopius makes a vague claim that Abraha paid some kind of tribute to Aksum: the relationship between Himyar and Aksum was, therefore, fraught with difficulties, and Abraha likely found that he could exert sovereignty in some areas (religious policy) more easily than he could in others (addressing Aksum's regional power).¹⁶⁴ Abraha also invited envoys representing al-Harith, his brother, Abu Karib, and Alamoundaros. Unfortunately it is not known exactly what the conference was intended to discuss, but the inclusion of representatives from the Roman and Persian super-phylarchates, together with the complete absence of *any* representative from Himyar's Arab allies, is a stark recognition of the elevated positions of the super-phylarchs.¹⁶⁵ The addition of envoys of Abu Karib, furthermore, raises questions about the precise nature of his position and his relationship with al-Harith; he was, perhaps, a counterweight to his brother, or he may have been seen as a reliable family hand to hold the southern periphery and extend Roman influence into North Arabia. The conference was commemorated on a large, four-sided pillar whose main purpose was to record repairs to the famous dam at Marib. Dated to March of 548, it also mentions the successful suppression of a revolt launched by a coalition of Kinda Arabs, Sabaeans, and Himyarites, including members of the dhu-Yazan.¹⁶⁶

Four years later (552) Abraha returned 'to South Arabia's traditional concern with its northern territories', campaigning in *Arabia Deserta*, once again to deal with a rebellion, this time by Maadd.¹⁶⁷ The inscription recording Abraha's expedition, written at Murayghan, over two hundred kilometres north of Najran, mentions that it was the fourth time that he had campaigned against this powerful group. This campaign may reflect Procopius' otherwise cryptic comment that while Abraha repeatedly reassured Justinian that he would set out against the Persians, he 'only once began the journey and then straightway turned back'.¹⁶⁸ Intriguingly, the inscription also says that 'Amr', a son of Alamoundaros, 'had been set up as governor over Maadd' and as part of the settlement provided his own son as a hostage.¹⁶⁹ This Amr is to be identified with the Ambrus who appears later in Roman sources (below). The inscription implies a relationship between central Arabia and the kings of al-Hira, and is yet another indication that the Arab-Islamic tradition's description of dynastic links between the two might reflect a sixth-century political reality. Periods of rivalry may have been played out with Maadd and al-Hira as the bargaining chips, and indeed Robin suggests that Hiran control of Maadd may have stretched back as far as the 530s, suggesting that Justinian's control over nominating Maadd's Kinda overlords was short-lived.¹⁷⁰ Amr/Ambrus also appears on a second inscription from Abraha's reign, discovered recently. It is undated, but Robin judges it to have been carved between 552 and 554; it records yet another expedition against Maadd, which resulted in Amr being 'chased out', presumably returned to al-Hira. As part of the campaign, Abraha brought Yathrib (Medina) under Himyarite control.¹⁷¹ For the time

being, at least, *Arabia Deserta* was firmly within Himyar's orbit—but this may have changed at some point between 555 and 565.

The most celebrated campaign undertaken by Abraha is also the most uncertain—the semi-mythical expedition against Mecca, intended to subvert Mecca's primacy as a pilgrimage centre and divert pilgrims instead to al-Qalis, Abraha's grand church in Sanaa, a city that was benefitting under Abraha's rule as Zafar declined in importance.¹⁷² The Arab-Islamic tradition records that the Himyarite army was preceded by a single elephant, Mahmud, who was singularly uncooperative when its handlers attempted to use it to lead the advance against Mecca. When 'they made it face the Yaman [Himyar]' it 'got up and started off'. But 'as soon as they directed it towards Mecca it knelt down'.¹⁷³ Abraha's expedition was a failure, and as such was celebrated in the famous *qasida* odes, the oral poetry of pre-Islamic Arabia.¹⁷⁴ For some, too, the event is echoed in sura 105 of the Quran, which opens by declaring triumphantly 'have you not seen how your Lord dealt with the men with the elephants?'¹⁷⁵ It is also possible that the expedition with the elephant was invented in order to explain the Quranic verse, rather than the other way around, and, as such, the historicity of this event is questionable, and if it happened, it probably did so late in Abraha's reign, perhaps between 555 and 565.¹⁷⁶ On the other hand, ancient drawings of elephants have been found by the *Mission archéologique franco-saoudienne de Najran* close to the wells at Hima,¹⁷⁷ and such a defeat would also explain the supremacy of Quraysh at the end of the sixth century, as well as the primacy of the Kaba at Mecca, central to the story as it was told in Arab-Islamic sources.¹⁷⁸

The death of Alamoundaros and the treaty of 561/2

In the midst of mediating between wayward bishops, writing to the spiritual leader of the Monophysites, and visiting Constantinople, al-Harith finally achieved the mission to which he had been entrusted by Justinian: to kill Alamoundaros. The Persian Arab leader's death in battle is reported by a number of sources. A short notice is given by a chronicle from 640 that found its way into the *Chronicle to 724*, noting for the year 554 that Alamoundaros 'died in June'.¹⁷⁹ More detailed versions are found in medieval chronicles, including the *Chronicle* of Michael the Syrian, the *Chronicle to 1234*, and the *Chronicle* of Bar Hebraeus.¹⁸⁰ There are some similarities between the three medieval versions, and it is likely that they share a common source, perhaps the lost second book of the *Ecclesiastical History* of John of Ephesus, which addressed events between 450 and 571.¹⁸¹ In general the three chronicles agree that the event took place in 554, somewhere in the region of Qinnasrin/Chalcis, southwest of Aleppo, suggesting that Alamoundaros was engaged in a raid deep into Roman territory; apparently one of al-Harith's sons died in the engagement, although this could be a confused reference to the earlier events described above.

A far more detailed version is given in the *Life of Symeon the Stylite the Younger*, written by an anonymous contemporary of the saint (521–92).¹⁸² The text emphasises the hubris, sinfulness, and wickedness of Alamoundaros, and the role of the Christian faith in bringing about his demise:

There was a phylarch of the Saracens, of those who were dependent on the empire of the Persians, whose name was Alamoundaros. He was a pagan, bloodthirsty, and bringing cruelty on all, he submitted the Christians whom he had taken prisoner to a thousand evils. He taunted them terribly, and let them die in chains, from hunger and a number of other punishments and various tortures; he forced them to pollute themselves by eating unclean meats and by participating in the cults of demons. He carried on this way for

a number of years, and nobody fought against him. It happened that during this time Roman envoys came down to Khusrau [I Anushirvan] king of the Persians, to negotiate for peace. Alamoundaros, who was a man of great stature, was there in the presence of the king and the ambassadors, blaspheming and taking the name of the Lord in vain, and showing off his body. He praised himself, saying 'For so many years I have destroyed the Christian people, and not even an arrow has hit me. I will take up arms again, and from now on there will no longer be any men living in their towns or in the country, because I will seize all of them and I will kill them all before me, both big and small'. And not long afterwards, having rounded up his soldiers, he went up against the frontiers of the Romans, exulting in his great army and his power, and all of the inhabitants of the East were greatly concerned. Then Symeon, the servant of God, went into a trance and had a vision which he told to us, saying:

In my vision today, I was lifted up by the Spirit, and I found myself on a small hill, near the frontiers of the Saracens, Persians, and Romans, and I was in the middle of an encampment of soldiers and Saracens where Arethas [al-Harith], the phylarch of the Romans, had his camp. And I saw in front of me a mass of horsemen who were coming with Alamoundaros the tyrant, as numerous as the stars in the sky, and the grains of sand next to the sea, and a great fear fell on the soldiers of Arethas, and the nerves of their arms began to fail. And in front of my eyes, the battle began, the formations clashed, and Alamoundaros had the power to destroy all. The Spirit of strength was with me, bearing a ball of fire and, at my prayer, he threw it at his [Alamoundaros'] head and knocked him to the ground. Be full of confidence, my children, because today the Lord has delivered a great salvation to all of the East'. Following this, we noted amongst ourselves the time and the hour when Symeon had told these things to us. In the week which followed, news of the victory came to the great city of Antioch. The news indicated how the impious Alamoundaros had been beaten on the very day and at the time when the saint had said. Afterwards several Roman soldiers arrived, and they confirmed that in this battle which had taken place opposite the hill, which the saint had spoken about, they had found themselves in a desperate situation and, having prayed to the servant of God, they had clearly understood that God had carried out this great benefaction through him. Furthermore, they told about everything which took place during the battle. Some of them even remained with the saint until they died. And we, with all of the ones who had heard [what happened] remembered everything that Symeon had said [in his] prophecy, and we praised God who had revealed to his servant saint the things which had taken place far away as well as those which [had taken place] close by. From that point the whole of the East, having obtained peace, lived in a great tranquillity.¹⁸³

Praying fervently in times of great crisis was, of course, a familiar literary trope for Christian writers. In Chapter 3 we saw how monks were delivered from desperate situations by communicating their peril to God; it is not to be unexpected that al-Harith's role in defeating his great rival was downplayed in this, the most detailed account and one that could claim to be closest to the events.

After the death of Alamoundaros, a new Romano-Persian treaty was finally agreed in 561/2, and it rectified an earlier omission that Alamoundaros had himself pointed out as he tried to find a way to break the Eternal Peace. This time, the Arab allies were specifically included; they had to abide by the broader terms set out in the treaty, and they were expressly forbidden from attacking the regular armies of the other side, i.e., the Roman Arabs were not

permitted to attack the Persians, and vice versa.¹⁸⁴ The details of the negotiations are known from the text of Menander, whose thorough record also shows that the Sasanians agreed to relax the rules surrounding the activities of Christians in Persia.¹⁸⁵ Menander's text also provides further information about diplomatic arguments over a whole host of ancillary issues. One account addressed the status of Ambrus, the son of Alamoundaros, who succeeded him as the super-phyllarch in the Persian empire. In the past, Justinian had, in the course of his arrangements with Khusrau, given Alamoundaros gold, and Ambrus felt that he deserved the same treatment.¹⁸⁶ The counter argument was put to him that these payments were in fact an exchange of gifts, a common diplomatic courtesy, and that if Ambrus wanted to get paid, then he had to provide something in return.¹⁸⁷

Menander's text is of particular interest, since he had first-hand access to imperial documents due to the fact that he had been commissioned by the emperor Maurice (582–602) to start work on a semi-official history. For the treaty of 561/2, for instance, it is clear from his text that he was able to consult the original and copy its terms directly into his own work. With this in mind it is important that the word used to describe the Arab allies is no longer *hypospondoi*, a term that denoted an inferior relationship, but *symmachoi*, a word relating an alliance on more equal terms. This was not the first time *symmachoi* was used, but its appearance in an official treaty that definitively and legally characterised what Arab allies could and could not do is a remarkable testament to their growing clout in intra- and interstate affairs.¹⁸⁸

In the year that followed the agreement of the treaty of 561/2, al-Harith journeyed to the capital to meet with Justinian. Theophanes reports that the main topic for discussion was who would succeed him, but Malalas adds the detail that the two would also address the problem of Ambrus, who was dancing carefully around the stipulations in the treaty by raiding al-Harith's territory, rather than Roman lands.¹⁸⁹ As suggested at the start of this chapter, it seems plausible that at this meeting, when al-Harith's son, al-Mundhir, was accepted as his successor, that he was provided with the rank of *megaloprepestatos*, subordinate to his father. Justinian died two years later, but al-Harith remained alive until 569, when the phyllarchate and his status as a patrician passed to his son. During his career al-Harith had achieved sufficient prestige to be included in the text of Ps.-Dionysius alongside Khusrau I, Justinian, and Abraha, in a list of 'kings who are famous'.¹⁹⁰

Al-Mundhir: statesman and warrior

On his accession, al-Mundhir faced an immediate attack by Qabus, the brother of Ambrus. This was an opportunistic raid against a newcomer looking to assert his authority, but was also a result of the decision by Justin II, Justinian's successor, to firmly scrap the 'gifts' that Ambrus had tried unsuccessfully to have reinstated earlier on.¹⁹¹ Qabus and his army, John of Ephesus notes, sorely underestimated their quarry, for al-Mundhir responded to their attack with great determination, putting Qabus and his bodyguard to flight and capturing pack animals and possessions of all kinds. Worse, al-Mundhir humiliated his opponent by entering his tent and sitting within it as if it was his own, before rubbing salt in the wound by pitching his *own* tent in Qabus' territory! A furious Qabus gathered his remaining forces and sent a message to al-Mundhir, telling him to be ready for a great battle. He received a contemptuous reply: Qabus, al-Mundhir said, should stay where he was, for he was coming to him. The result was a great slaughter—al-Mundhir had succeeded his father in convincing style.¹⁹² Notably, there is no indication that he was required to travel to Constantinople to be confirmed by the emperor in person, or receive any symbols of office, as was common in other

parts of the empire, such as in North Africa.¹⁹³ Clearly al-Harith's visit had been enough. The super-phylarchate was being transformed, bit by bit, into a fiefdom.¹⁹⁴

Another indication of their growing autonomy was that once again the Roman and Persian Arabs were fighting each other without any involvement from their imperial patrons and without any appreciable political value to either state. Their independence of action was a direct result of the trust and power devolved onto them by the Roman and Persian leaders, and, by 569/70, when the confrontation between Qabus and al-Mundhir took place, these two Arab groups had begun to look a lot more like powerful states-in-waiting than subordinate allies. In Constantinople, there seems to have been some recognition of the danger that this development might pose to imperial authority. After his victories in 569, al-Mundhir wrote to Justin II to ask him for gold so that he could hire more troops, in anticipation of an impending counterattack by an enraged Qabus. The reaction from Constantinople was the opposite of what he expected:

when Justin, the emperor, heard that he had written to him for gold, he was greatly irritated, and boiled with rage, and he attacked him [al-Mundhir] with abuse, and threatened him severely. And he strove to kill him through a secret treachery.¹⁹⁵

This request for gold for troops, Greatrex notes, would have triggered some serious questions in Constantinople: was this novel initiative, the super-phylarchate, at risk of getting out of control? More worryingly, while Abu Karib (and perhaps even Qays/Kaisos) may have formed a counterbalance of sorts to al-Harith, there appeared now to be nobody who could be such a foil to al-Mundhir.¹⁹⁶ Clearly, some form of remedial action was needed. According to John of Ephesus, Justin hatched an assassination plot, which was then botched in spectacular fashion. He sent a letter to Marcian, the *magister militum per Orientem*, informing him that al-Mundhir would be ordered to go to him. When he arrived, Marcian was to arrange his execution. A second letter was intended for al-Mundhir, containing his orders. 'But, in truth, as everyone eventually found out', John of Ephesus says, 'by the grace of God', the letters got mixed up. Seething, al-Mundhir and his retinue left for the remotest parts of the Syrian desert, leaving large parts of the frontier unprotected.¹⁹⁷

The story of the switched letters seems so contrived that its authenticity has long been questioned. It is not at all clear if Justin actually intended to have al-Mundhir killed, or if an episode of discord between phylarch and emperor was being embellished by John of Ephesus. As a Monophysite historian, for whom al-Mundhir was a true hero, and who later on was to be treated with terrible duplicity by a craven and feckless imperial court, John may have exaggerated al-Mundhir's status as a selfless warrior and Monophysite champion, drawing on a rich history of imperial mistreatment. Most likely we shall never know the truth of the matter.

While al-Mundhir stubbornly remained in self-imposed exile, Abraha's rule was coming to a close in South Arabia. The final inscription from his reign, dated to 559/60, records a vast engineering project whose exact purpose cannot be discerned from the surviving fragments of the text. It is possible, however, that it was the famous al-Qalis, the church in Sanaa built with Roman technical help, and much commented on by later authors such as al-Tabari who said that it was 'a marvelous building, whose like had never been seen before, using gold and remarkable dyestuffs and stains'.¹⁹⁸ Five years later Abraha was dead, and his two sons, Yaksum and Masruq, proved unequal to the task of managing the vast kingdom and quickly succumbed to a Persian invasion. Theophanes of Byzantium,¹⁹⁹ whose sixth-century work is known only from Photius (and which provides a fascinating account of how silkworm

breeding was introduced to Constantinople, finally subverting the Persian quasi-monopoly), records that Khusrau's general, Miranes, defeated and captured 'Sanaturces', i.e., Masruq, and 'sacked their city [? Zafar or Sanaa] and enslaved the inhabitants'.²⁰⁰ Later, the ninth-century writer Ibn Hisham reported that a Himyarite aristocrat, Sayf b. dhu-Yazan (a relative of the Sharahil who suppressed Najran)²⁰¹ had invited Persian intervention when he petitioned al-Numan, the son of Alamoundaros, to save them from the Ethiopian 'ravens'; improbably, Hamza al-Isfahani says that Sayf waited for seven long years outside the gates of Khusrau I's palace before winning Persian intervention. Ibn Hisham's account is wonderfully florid, saying that the Persian general's bow was 'so tough that no one but he could bend it' and he only gave battle after ordering that 'his eyebrows be fastened back'!²⁰² Robert Hoyland has suggested that the Persian invasion was the endpoint of part of a broader proxy war, with Yaksum the Roman favourite, and Masruq that of the Persians; after prevailing over his brother, Masruq 'either lost the faith of his imperial backers or aroused their ire', resulting in Khusrau's invasion.²⁰³ Conversely, Bowersock has suggested that Masruq first petitioned Justin II, and only turned to Persia when this effort failed.²⁰⁴ As part of this campaign, it is possible that Oman (Mazun) was occupied by the Persians.²⁰⁵

The Persian invasion of Yemen and the collapse of the Himyarite state signalled the unravelling of Roman policy in Arabia and the Red Sea. Christian Robin has pointed out the coincidence in dates between the establishment of al-Harith as super-phylarch (528/9) and the Aksumite invasion of Himyar in 525. There is a similar correspondence between the end of the Christian state of Himyar, and the collapse of the Roman Arab super-phylarchate in Syria.²⁰⁶ For, as it turned out, Justin's plot against al-Mundhir—if indeed it happened—was just the opening act in a concerted effort to revise arrangements. In the 570s, however, the advantage still lay, for the moment, with al-Mundhir. Indeed, the Romans could have used an impetuous and aggressive commander like him, especially after a string of disasters that included the terrible blockade of Dara, a devastating showcase of Persian excellence in siege-craft.²⁰⁷ It was not until 575 that al-Mundhir returned to imperial service, although he took some coaxing:

King Mundhir persevered in his vigilance and caution by which he stood, with all of his army against all of the princes and the army of the Roman kingdom for about three years. Then, as a Christian man worried about the Roman realm, and full of anger towards the Persian Tayyaye, since they dared with the army of the Persians to make an incursion and [then] devastated and burned and took captives as far as Antioch, and had then returned to their own land with great plunder and an infinity of captives—he proposed that he might be reconciled to the Roman state and fight for them. While the king [i.e., the Roman Emperor] continued to send letters to him through a number of nobles, the king [continued to] deny [everything] and said that the letters to kill him were written without his knowledge. [Mundhir] stubbornly stood firm, and declared that he would accept neither the letters nor whoever was sent to carry them to him. He was prepared for war against anyone who might dare to approach the vicinity of his camp.²⁰⁸

Finally al-Mundhir contacted Justinian, the new *magister militum per Orientem*, and suggested that the two meet at the symbolic location of Rusafa-Sergiopolis, a place whose sanctity ensured a safe meeting but which was also of great significance to the Arab phylarch.²⁰⁹ There, within a cemetery outside the fortress walls and close to a fifth-century mausoleum, al-Mundhir had constructed a small building that still stands today; within the building, alongside ornate scenes carved into the walls, a rather clichéd Greek acclamation inscription reads 'the fortune of al-Mundhir triumphs'²¹⁰ (Figure 4.15).

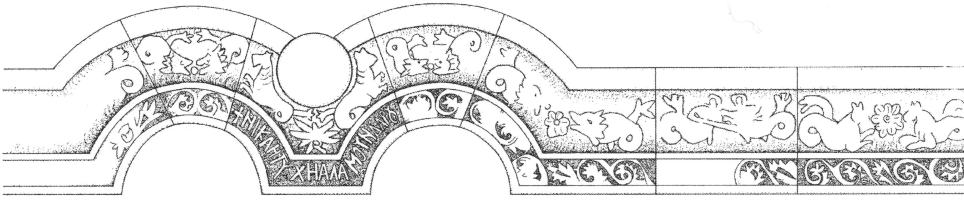


Figure 4.15 Drawing of the inscription inside the al-Mundhir building, showing the elaborate decoration accompanying the text. Used with the kind permission of Dr. Gunnar Brands, from Brands 1998: 229.

The ‘al-Mundhir building’, which dates to no earlier than the second half of the sixth century (and probably closer to *c.* 570, from pottery found there) reflects a deepening of the commitment to the cult of St Sergius that began with al-Harith.²¹¹ It is a cross between a church and an audience hall, a place to receive patrons, to demonstrate al-Mundhir’s largesse, and perhaps even to act as a command post, given Rusafa’s location in a zone of Romano-Persian competition.²¹² At the same time, the building was *outside* the walls of the fortress, placed adjacent to the main route that led from the Roman fort at Sura to Rusafa (thirty kilometres), and then on to Palmyra and then Damascus. As Michaela Konrad notes, each person passing down this road towards Rusafa would see the al-Mundhir building before approaching Rusafa’s north gate²¹³ (Figures 4.16 and 4.17).

The combination of all these characteristics led Whittow to call the building ‘the equivalent of a great shaykh’s seven-pole tent, but built in stone and in a Roman idiom’. Indeed, its blending of style and form places it within the same ‘hybrid’ category of the buildings such as the djedars and the tomb of Theoderic discussed in Chapter 3.²¹⁴ Most importantly, the building, close to the site of Sergius’ assumed martyrdom and just beyond Rusafa’s magnificently ornate northern gate, provides a further reflection of how Arab tribal power could be mapped onto fixed points in the landscape, developing those earlier efforts by missionaries



Figure 4.16 The al-Mundhir building at Rusafa. Photograph by the author.

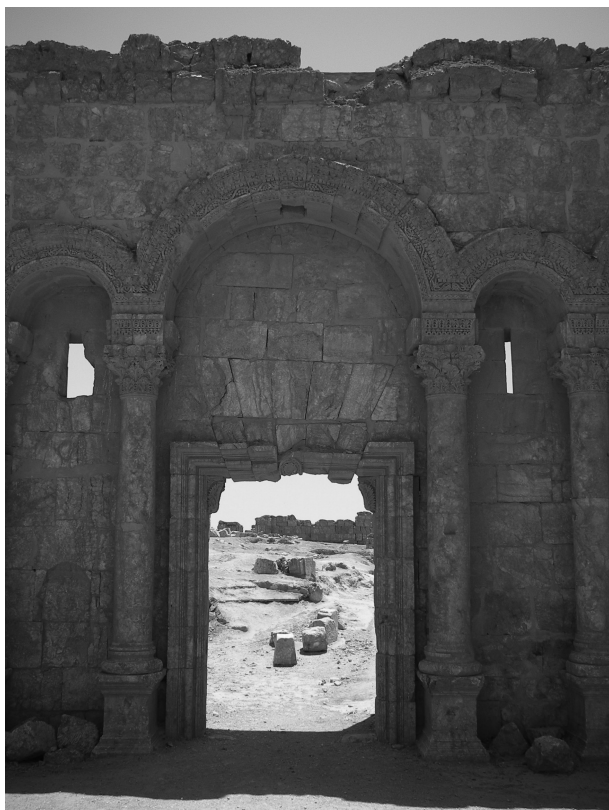


Figure 4.17 The ornate northern gateway of Rusafa. Photograph by the author.

and bishops to concentrate the attention of ‘wandering Arabs’ around similar places. This time, though, the agent concentrating the attention of people around the site was not a Christian bishop, but an Arab aristocrat whose power could not help but be buttressed by his prominent association with such a well-loved saint.²¹⁵

It is of great importance that the cult of St Sergius was not confined to any particular Christological creed, and was revered by Chalcedonians, Monophysites, Nestorians from Persia, and others. Al-Mundhir’s association with the cult therefore tempered his family’s prominence in Monophysite affairs, helping to make him an acceptable arbiter, for example, for Tiberius II (below).²¹⁶ The feast day of St Sergius was on October 7, when the barren landscape around Rusafa would have been transformed by cooler weather and seasonal rainfall, and could provide a measure of pasturage and water for the large numbers of visitors who came there each year.²¹⁷

Elizabeth Key Fowden has suggested that the building, and indeed Rusafa more generally, functioned as a type of *haram*, ‘a hallowed space carefully demarcated and maintained’; such sites were often near locations of religious significance. We saw numerous examples of this kind of place in Chapter 3, as they were delineated through the various conversion narratives of Arab tribes and leaders, and Nonnosus referred to ‘a sacred meeting-place consecrated to one of the gods, where they assemble twice a year’ which he encountered in

the Arabian Peninsula; at such times, Nonnosus reported, ‘complete peace prevails’ (it is tempting to imagine that he was referring to Mecca).²¹⁸ For his part, Diodorus had remarked that the ‘Palm Groves’, due to their abundant natural resources, also constituted a sacred place.²¹⁹ A *haram* was also ‘neutral ground where conflicting parties could meet and seek resolution of disagreement’—and, sure enough, it was in front of St Sergius’ tomb at Rusafa that Justinian and al-Mundhir finally met.²²⁰ Whether this was inside the walls of the city at Rusafa’s Basilica A, to where the relics of St Sergius were moved in c. 500, is not explained, but ‘letters of peace and reconciliation’ were exchanged which restored al-Mundhir’s confidence²²¹ (Figure 4.18).

Almost immediately, John of Ephesus says, al-Mundhir set out for Persian territory and made straight for the ‘hirta of Numan’, that is, al-Hira. Once again al-Mundhir showed his contempt for his enemy by pitching his tent amidst the settlement, which he and his troops had thoroughly looted, although they took care not to burn the churches.²²² Importantly, al-Mundhir distributed much of the plunder that he had collected; John writes that he gave it to orthodox (i.e., Monophysite) monasteries and churches, and to the needy amongst the poor. In so doing al-Mundhir matched the expectations not only of a tribal chief, one of whose roles was to provide for those under him, but also simultaneously fulfilled the expectations of a Roman noble, to provide succour to the poor.²²³

Intermittent conflict filled the remainder of the decade, but peace talks were underway when Khusrāu I died in 579. His son, Hormizd IV, put an end to this conciliatory attitude and war resumed between Hormizd and the aggressive new *magister militum per Orientem*, Maurice. Justin II had died in 578 after an illness that had, perhaps, been precipitated by the fall of Dara, and Tiberius II, formerly Justin’s *comes excubitorum*, commander of the imperial guard, had taken over and was now sole emperor. According to Michael the Syrian, in 578 or 579 al-Mundhir travelled to Constantinople to offer his greetings to the new emperor, but was taken aback when Tiberius berated him for leaving everyone in the lurch following the botched assassination attempt. Al-Mundhir agreed that the emperor was right, but then



Figure 4.18 The northern aisle of Basilica A at Rusafa, looking east. The three small arched windows in the structure in the background mark the location of the shrine to St Sergius. Photograph by the author.

produced the letters in question, which Tiberius (we are led to assume) knew nothing about. Changing his approach, Tiberius appeared contrite, and lavished al-Mundhir with gifts. However, the text reports that al-Mundhir then extracted concessions from Tiberius to write to Gregory, the Chalcedonian patriarch of Antioch, to appeal for 'peace of the church(es)'. In other words, al-Mundhir was looking for imperial support for freedom of worship. As this would have involved the end to the persecution of the Monophysites, it is possible that this event might be conflated with the more detailed description of al-Mundhir's visit to Constantinople at Tiberius' request found in John of Ephesus (below), or it may be that there were two visits that happened close together. While he had apparently not done so when he took over from al-Harith, it was perhaps wise for al-Mundhir to go to the capital and greet the emperor and pledge his loyalty, in light of his treatment by Justin II and his own self-imposed withdrawal from imperial service.²²⁴

In 581, Maurice invaded Persia with al-Mundhir and his army in support. The events that transpired on this campaign, together with a near-simultaneous affair in Constantinople, would seal al-Mundhir's fate. Although the campaign followed the events in Constantinople, it actually helps to treat them in reverse to show how a simmering disapproval of al-Mundhir (based on the Constantinople debacle) could fan the flames of something that, by itself, might not have proven sufficient to topple the Arab leader.

In 581, from the fortress of Circesium at the confluence of the Khabur and Euphrates rivers in eastern Syria, Maurice set out to cross the Tigris and make for the Persian capital; he had nearly reached Ctesiphon when an ambitious enemy counteroffensive threatened Edessa. Precisely how such a risky Persian move was made with such confidence was explained in no uncertain terms by Theophylact Simocatta. No partisan supporter of Arab phylarchs, he said that al-Mundhir leaked the Roman plan of attack to the Persians, and in doing so, in Theophylact's memorable phrase, had 'like a drone destroyed the beehives'. Theophylact continued with the cutting comment that 'the Saracen tribe is known to be the most unreliable and fickle, their mind is not steadfast, and their judgment is not firmly grounded in prudence'.²²⁵ Theophylact was not the only one to pin the blame on al-Mundhir; Evagrius, a Chalcedonian, makes a similar claim, saying that al-Mundhir was 'thoroughly treacherous, and refused to cross the Euphrates and fight alongside Maurice'.²²⁶ Not surprisingly, John of Ephesus stands up for the Arab phylarch, and is clear, in his view, about what happened, discussing it in two separate places in his narrative. The expedition was proceeding apace, he says, when they found a key bridge over the Tigris river destroyed. The Roman army was exhausted and each commander blamed the other for having to retreat with little to show for their efforts, and later their feud took the form of official written complaints. John of Ephesus reports the accusation that Maurice did indeed think that al-Mundhir had leaked the plan, which allowed the bridge to be destroyed. In another section of his work, John repeats the matter, adding that Tiberius tried his best to reconcile the two, but to no avail; the two warriors parted company in simmering anger, the matter unresolved.²²⁷ Maurice, a Chalcedonian, may have been motivated by distaste towards an individual prominently identified with the Monophysite community.²²⁸ Al-Mundhir vented his frustration on the Persians and their Arab militia, pillaging the countryside and again sacking al-Hira.²²⁹ He also reached the fortress of Anatha (Ana) on the Euphrates, where he conducted a vigorous siege against this formidable target.²³⁰

In and of itself, the failed expedition may not have been enough to remove al-Mundhir. Events that had earlier transpired in Constantinople, however, could now be called on to provide further ammunition, allowing the festering resentment against al-Mundhir to spread to a full conflagration. Just as Tritheism had preoccupied the Monophysites during the reign of al-Harith, so a new quarrel had sprung up during the time of al-Mundhir. The Arab leader

had quickly followed al-Harith in his patronage of the Monophysite community, and, so, when further crisis befell the community, once again people turned to the trusted negotiators of Rome's leading Arab family—only this time, the request came from the emperor Tiberius II himself. The row was complex, and the stakes were high.

When Sergius, the patriarch of Antioch, died in c. 563/4, the patriarch of Alexandria, a Monophysite named Theodosius (536–66), selected a certain Paul 'the Black' as Sergius' replacement.²³¹ Paul was duly consecrated in Antioch, but was then deposed by the successor to Theodosius in Alexandria, Peter. Paul fled to al-Harith, who sheltered him.²³² Paul was disliked by Peter because he had thrown his support behind a certain Theodore, who had competed with Peter to succeed Theodosius in Alexandria. Peter and Paul were thus at loggerheads with one another. Jacob Baradeus, in many ways the senior figure amongst the Monophysites, was forced to take sides, and did so, picking Peter. Jacob thus made enemies amongst Paul's supporters (the 'Paulites'), who were themselves opposed by the supporters of Jacob ('Jacobites').²³³ In 578, Jacob, Peter, and Paul all died, and this should have ended the squabble. However, the successor to Peter in Alexandria, Damian (patriarch 575–606), and the successor to Paul in Antioch, unhelpfully named Peter (patriarch 581–91), ensured that the two patriarchates kept arguing with one another. No wonder, then, that John of Ephesus referred to this as 'the furnace of the Babylonians'.²³⁴

Al-Mundhir journeyed to Constantinople in 580 to mediate between the warring factions. Preventing disunity amongst the Monophysites was often an imperial aim, since in the sixth century there was still the chance that they may see the error of their ways, and return to the fold; this would be hard to achieve if an opposing negotiator could not be found who was able to speak for the community as a whole, and so solving intra-Monophysite disunity was an important first step. Al-Mundhir was uniquely positioned to act as arbitrator, since despite the fact that there was considerable support for Jacob amongst his people, as noted above Paul himself had, at an earlier time, fled to al-Harith and been welcomed there. The family could thus claim a degree of impartiality. John of Ephesus attended the negotiations in Constantinople, and paints a remarkable portrait of al-Mundhir: a strong-willed man with a great presence, who imposed his personality and character on the delegates, appealing to their shared faith as the best starting point to heal the many divisions. He was, as Philip Wood notes, 'self-controlled and moderate during a time of schism, when all the great men of the Church had lost their heads'.²³⁵ There was much optimism: al-Mundhir was feted by Tiberius, who gave titles to two of al-Mundhir's sons who were present with him, and provided a 'royal diadem' for al-Mundhir himself, a great honour that John of Ephesus says had never before been allowed to an Arab phylarch.²³⁶ Of the diadem little else is known, but an undated inscription from al-Burj near Dumayr in Syria (now in the National Museum in Damascus), records his children:

Flavius Alamoundaros, *paneuphemos*, *patrikios*, phylarch, in thanks to Lord God and Saint Sabinianos, for his salvation and for the salvation of his children, *endoxotatoi*, built this holy martyryon.²³⁷

Two of al-Mundhir's sons were therefore honoured with the same rank held by al-Harith, while al-Mundhir himself possessed the very senior *paneuphemos*; the sons are not named in John of Ephesus' text, but the inscription from (?) Maarrat al-Numan mentioned at the beginning of this chapter records al-Numan, son of al-Mundhir, as both *endoxotatos*, phylarch, and *stratelatos*.²³⁸ Such was the prestige accorded to al-Mundhir and his family—a prestige and fame that exceeded that of al-Harith by some considerable distance.

This prestige looked set to grow even further as negotiations concluded on March 2, 580. Grievances had been aired, mediation carried out, and a settlement had been found. However, several of the bishops decided to wreck the agreement by the tried-and-tested tactic of rousing public anger at the deal. 'They wrote letters', John of Ephesus said, 'and made demonstrations, in Syria and Alexandria.' Further, 'they confused many and [urged them to] stand against what had been done'.²³⁹ Ignorant of what was going on, al-Mundhir left Constantinople for Antioch, where he was received with great joy, not least because he had wrung from Tiberius a promise to end the persecution of the Monophysite community (see the earlier mention of this, above).²⁴⁰ The news of such celebrations got back to al-Mundhir's enemies in Constantinople, who accused him, in his absence, to the emperor. Still without much of an idea of what was transpiring, al-Mundhir paused on his return home to fight off a bold incursion by the Persian Arabs; 'very few', John says, with great flourish, 'escaped from his sword'.²⁴¹ Al-Mundhir's achievement was short-lived. Damian quickly recanted and attacked the memory of Paul, sending a letter criticising him to various clergy in Syria and further abroad. As the situation unravelled, al-Mundhir was called on to undertake the failed expedition against the Persians, and could not apply himself to address Damian's actions or try to negotiate a new settlement. The fact that it was Damian and other saboteurs who were the principal architects of the chaos did not seem to matter, for the Roman court decided, it seemed, to blame the negotiator.

These twin successive failures—one at court, the other on campaign—sealed al-Mundhir's fate. The most detailed source for what happened is the text of John of Ephesus, for whom al-Mundhir was a hero; he can hardly be accepted as an impartial witness. Nevertheless, al-Mundhir was, for some of his educated and well-placed contemporaries, like Theophylact Simocatta, a barbarian outsider. The resentful sentiments of entrenched aristocrats and status-conscious cliques in the capital can easily be imagined. Al-Mundhir was a member of the *illustres*, but was he truly Roman? Was he not a *nouveau-riche*, elevated only because of his famous father? Whittow suggested that the more the family of al-Harith looked like Roman aristocrats, through performing the normal activities of those elites such as patronising churches and appearing on foundation inscriptions (and thus investing in the community both financially and morally), the more that it 'was necessary to emphasise and foster difference' on the part of those at court.²⁴² No matter then how 'Roman' al-Mundhir behaved, he was still an outsider, and indeed, none of the Jafnids took a Hellenised name; the inscriptions and texts in which they appear preserve their Arabic names as they were written in Greek, with minor variations and grammatical errors (e.g. Alamundarus, Alamoundaros).²⁴³ The ease with which al-Mundhir was outmanoeuvred at court therefore suggests that John of Ephesus' account should be accorded more weight than we might otherwise give it. He says that Maurice complained to Tiberius, as mentioned above, after the failed campaign. With the Monophysites in disarray following the conference chaired by al-Mundhir, who had been *personally* chosen by Tiberius for the job, the emperor's own reputation was tarnished, and it is not a stretch to imagine that Maurice's condemnations fell on fertile ground: due to the very personal nature of the arrangement between the family and the emperor, a legacy of Justinian's fateful decision to create the super-phylarchate, the revocation of imperial favour would mean an *immediate* cessation of al-Mundhir's position. To these factors can be added the aggravating factor that al-Mundhir's power base was very much not the court at Constantinople, or indeed anywhere near the imperial centre of power. His power base, like that of al-Harith, was the province of Arabia and the rural districts round about, an area clearly delineated by the literary sources and the inscriptions that refer to al-Harith and his family (Figure 4.19).

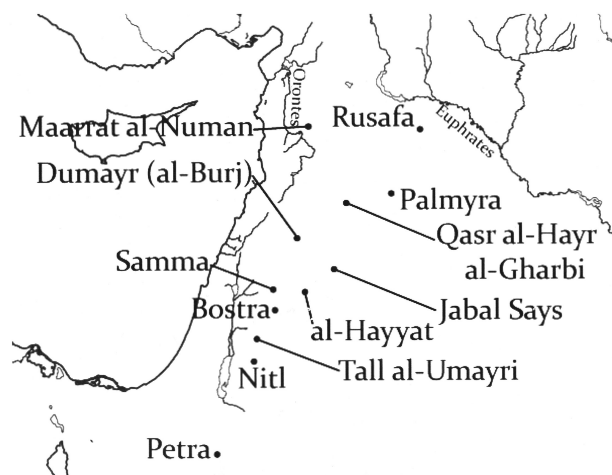


Figure 4.19 Map showing the sites which provide epigraphic evidence connected to the family of al-Harith discussed in this chapter. Illustration by the author.

Duly, therefore, another plot was put together, by which Magnus, a friend of al-Mundhir—and apparently a patron at court, a link between the murky world of Constantinopolitan elite intrigue and the steppes of Syria—was persuaded to invite the Arab phylarch to a church consecration at a town, Evaria, that he had founded and fortified himself. In a travesty of normal practice, if John is telling the truth, Magnus took the patriarch of Antioch with him as a guarantor of al-Mundhir's safety. Al-Mundhir accordingly accepted Magnus' request that 'you should not bring with you a large bodyguard...do not go to any expense for a large force, but come with just a few'.²⁴⁴ After arriving and being met by Magnus, in short order al-Mundhir was arrested, and Magnus revealed that Tiberius had ordered him to be taken to Constantinople to answer the charges against him. John of Ephesus says that al-Mundhir was immediately deflated; 'he felt weak and beaten, like a lion of the desert, which was shut up inside a cage'.²⁴⁵

Al-Mundhir never got a chance to prove his case. Instead, together with his wife, two sons, and a daughter, he was placed under house arrest and given a stipend. Some say that the Romans had done the same thing to Zenobia, after the sack of Palmyra.²⁴⁶ Al-Mundhir's eldest son, al-Numan, however, remained at large and began to exact a terrible vengeance. (This is likely the same al-Numan known from the (?) Maarrat al-Numan inscription). He began with the very personal act of sacking Magnus' house, and then branched out to killing and plundering, and visiting on the Romans the type of raid they had always tried to prevent the Persian Arabs from carrying out. Easily evading Roman forces through their knowledge of the desert, the Arab troops refused to stop their raids even when messengers reached al-Numan beseeching him to do so. He replied, not without some justification, that al-Mundhir had been poorly rewarded for his efforts on behalf of the Roman emperor, who had now also cut off what seems to have been some kind of *annona*, a food supply of corn.²⁴⁷ Still not finished, al-Numan turned on the important Arabian city of Bostra, demanding that al-Mundhir's armour, which was evidently held there, be given over to them. The Romans refused and started a fight which ended with the death of their commander and much of the army. Tiberius tried ineffectually to settle matters by asking Magnus, based at Edessa, to

place a compliant Arab leader as chief phylarch (in fact a son of al-Mundhir was apparently considered preferable), but he was either unable to do so or his choice did not succeed.²⁴⁸

With a few exceptions, it is not possible to write the rest of the story, because the remaining chapters of the *Ecclesiastical History* dealing with al-Mundhir have not survived. However, it is known that he was exiled to Sicily after 582, when his antagonist Maurice replaced Tiberius on the imperial throne.²⁴⁹ Maurice would face his own reckoning twenty years later, when he was forced by the usurper, Phocas, to watch as his sons were murdered in front of him, after which he too was put to the sword.²⁵⁰ According to Michael the Syrian (once again drawing on Cyrus of Batna), after the death of Magnus ('a wicked and most evil man')²⁵¹ al-Numan tried to make a deal with Maurice, who said that if he fought the Persians, al-Mundhir would be released. But this was a poisoned chalice, since al-Numan would also have to renounce his Monophysite beliefs. Michael was writing at a time when the divisions between Chalcedonians and Monophysites had greatly solidified; this may not, therefore, be true, but Michael does add that the Roman authorities eventually succeeded in capturing him, and dispatched him to Sicily to join his father.²⁵²

With al-Mundhir's arrest and exile, the super-phylarchate collapsed. Michael the Syrian counted fifteen individual princes amongst the wreckage of the 'kingdom of the *tayyaye*', noting that most went over to Persia, 'and from then on the empire of the Christian *tayyaye* ended'.²⁵³ In 586/7, Maurice had 'Ogyrus and Zogomus', 'tribal chiefs of the force of Roman allies, whom Latins are accustomed to call Saracens', on campaign with him, but nothing else is known of these individuals; clearly, however, Arab militia were still useful enough to take part in Roman wars.²⁵⁴ According to the *Chronicle to 1234*, when Maurice died, al-Mundhir was released and returned home, but nothing more is heard about him in any literary or epigraphic source.²⁵⁵ Damian, meanwhile, continued to wreak havoc in the church. Michael the Syrian describes further mediation by one Jafna, a phylarch, which took place at the church of St Sergius at Gabitha (Jabiya) in c. 590. Damian was as intransigent as always, however, and the squabble between Antioch and Alexandria would only be settled in 616, ten years after Damian died.²⁵⁶ An intriguing text from Egypt mentions the restoration of a door, carried out by '[P]aulakios, the *megalopr[epestatos] komes* and *topot[eretes]* [lieutenant] of Fl[avius] Aritha, the *panueph[emos]* duke', dated to 595. The provenance of the inscription is unclear, but this text is sometimes read as an indication (as with the 'Nouminos' from Rusafa, discussed below) that some members of al-Mundhir's family were still being integrated into the Roman hierarchy, following the traditions begun by Justinian many years before.²⁵⁷

Al-Numan and the collapse of the Arab dynasty at al-Hira

While Alamoundaros dominates the sixth-century literary sources for Persian Arabs, it is the reign of the final of these leaders, al-Numan, which was the most important for the creation of al-Hira's afterlife in the Arab-Islamic literary tradition. Philip Wood has argued that the basis for this re-imagining of al-Hira's past was a collection of histories written during al-Numan's reign, pointing out that the ninth-century narratives of al-Hira focus more on al-Numan than any other Persian Arab leader.²⁵⁸

Despite their general impiety and hostile attitude towards Christians, a favourite topic in Roman sources, the kings of al-Hira kept their own counsel for much of the time due to the presence of Christians within their own ranks. This fact is underscored by the narratives of the Najran episode, and further by the fact that the preponderance of savage actions committed against Christians took place in Roman territory and could therefore be explained as part of the Roman-Persian political rivalry. Eventually al-Numan, the final king at al-Hira, openly adopted

Christianity and was baptised. In familiar fashion, the *Chronicle of Seert* reports that al-Numan was ‘addicted to paganism’ and suffered from the unhealthy habit of venerating idols and the cult of Venus. He turned in desperation to several leading Christians, including Simeon b. Jabir, the bishop of al-Hira, and Sabrisho, the bishop of Lashom²⁵⁹ (later a *catholicos* of the Church of the East) and a monk named Isozkha. These men intervened, and al-Numan was baptised ‘in the fourth year of Khusrau [II]’, AD 594. The *Chronicle* adds further details: al-Numan’s sons were also baptised, and Hasan, one of the sons, took the side of the Sasanian king in the civil war that had started with the overthrow of Khusrau’s father, Hormizd IV, and the rebellion of Bahram, a leading Persian general, who then deposed Khusrau with the charismatic promise that he would restore the Arsacids.²⁶⁰ Khusrau went on the run and sought refuge with Maurice. Hasan was not, apparently, the only Arab noble involved in the revolt; according to the *Chronicle to 1234*, one Abu Jafna Numan b. al-Mundhir, who lived at Rusafa, acted as a go-between for Khusrau as he negotiated the terms of his sanctuary. The name and location have suggested a re-establishment of the Jafnid super-phyllarchate (Abu Jafna may also identified with Jafna, on the preceding page), and a graffito found at Rusafa mentions one ‘Nouminos’, an al-Numan. The graffito itself refers to a Sergius, *paraphulax*, perhaps ‘bodyguard’ of Nouminos, and, like the inscriptions from Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharbi, this text represents a welcoming acclamation for Nouminos. While there is no particular reason to think that this person is the same al-Numan from the *Chronicle to 1234*, neither is there any evidence to discount such a theory, and the Arab-Islamic tradition places a certain al-Numan at Rusafa at the outset of the later war between Phocas and Khusrau, saying that he had restored the cisterns there.²⁶¹ In any case, there is no reason to suppose that a restoration of the super-phyllarchate was necessary: Arab elites had excelled at mediation at the highest levels for several generations, and the use of these services for Khusrau’s needs may have been the most practical solution²⁶² (Figure 4.20).

Another narrative of al-Numan’s conversion is found in the *Life of Sabrisho*, also from the *Chronicle of Seert*. Again, al-Numan appears as a bloodthirsty, idol-worshipping heathen, devoted to the cult of Zhora/Venus; the *Life* notes that al-Numan’s two sisters, Hind and Mawiya/Mavia, had already adopted Christianity. In an effort to win al-Numan for Christ, Simeon b. Jabir prayed incessantly for divine intervention. Eventually, God sent al-Numan two competing visions: the first, a handsome young man, well-spoken, and of good humour;



Figure 4.20 Silver drachm of Khusrau II, AD 616–17, minted at Veh Ardashir. On the obverse, a crowned bust of the king. On the reverse, Zoroastrian fire altar with two attendants. Private collection.

the other, a black, deformed Ethiopian, symbolising the devil. In this crude tableau the young man offered a bounty of riches and success if al-Numan chose Christianity, but he refused to abandon 'my mistress, al-Uzzai, the chief goddess, who lives in the heavens, to make myself Christian and worship a man crucified by the Jews'. Sure enough, the Ethiopian tormented al-Numan, bringing him to the edge of despair. Finally giving in, he went to Simeon b. Jabir, who obtained permission from Khusrau to baptise al-Numan, together with his family and the leading officers of his army.²⁶³

Unfortunately, al-Numan was soon lured back to his former faith by 'heretics', and was possessed by 'a demon' for a second time. Writing to Ishoyabh, the *catholicos*, he asked for the ministrations of Sabrisho. Again Khusrau was consulted, and he and the *catholicos* wrote to Sabrisho and the latter, together with Isozkha, the monk, went to work on al-Numan's demon. Faced with such a formidable set of adversaries, the demon cried out that it was being pursued 'by the disciples of Christ, our enemy!', but Sabrisho and Isozkha quickly subdued the troublesome imp and persevered until God healed the king, at which point the miracle was accompanied by a terrible noise that was heard throughout the surrounding countryside.²⁶⁴

The baptism story and subsequent Christian affectations of al-Numan were well known in antiquity and found their way into the Arab-Islamic tradition. A particularly detailed version of al-Numan's conversion is known from a text known as *al-Manaqib al-Mazyadiya*, written under the sponsorship of the Mazyadid ruler Sayf al-Dawla (1086–1108). The story contained in this text features a number of familiar elements: the illness of al-Numan; a letter to Khusrau, seeking permission to convert; the agency of Simeon b. Jabir; the two sisters, Hind and Mawiya/Mavia; a second illness; the intercession of Sabrisho. The *Manaqib* adds new details, such as the purported correspondence between al-Numan and Ishoyabh, the *catholicos*. Another key difference is that al-Numan's conversion is not discussed in order to elevate or praise the king; rather, the author of the *Manaqib*, Abu al-Baqa al-Hilli, considers al-Numan to be something of a wretch and a hypocrite, who quickly apostatised and returned to a life of idolatry.²⁶⁵ In this Abu al-Baqa echoed the sentiments of the historian Evagrius, who cheerfully described al-Numan as 'a most abominable and totally polluted heathen'.²⁶⁶

The richness of these stories and their transmission into the early Middle Ages offers a remarkable insight into the weight placed on al-Numan's reign by authors of the period. Other aspects of al-Hira's Christian milieu were also of great interest. The geographer Yaqt (d. 1229), for example, reported verbatim the foundation inscription of the famous monastery of Hind the Elder at al-Hira. According to legend, Hind was the great granddaughter of the Kinda ruler Hujr (Chapter 3) and, as wife of Alamoundaros, the mother of the Amr/Ambrus who appears in Roman texts and Himyarite inscriptions (above). This genealogy and the inscription from the monastery, which records its foundation during the reign of Khusrau I, cannot be verified from other sources, although we have seen several times in this chapter the possibility or likelihood of dynastic links between Kinda/Maadd and al-Hira. Yaqt prefaces his discussion of the monastery by recording an episode of antiquarian tourism, carried out by three of his informants, who had gone to al-Hira to see the tomb of the famous Alamoundaros. Spying something written on the wall of the monastery, one of Yaqt's informants had a ladder brought over so he could climb and see what was written there. It turned out to be a sombre poem which, like other later memories of al-Hira, recalled the city's faded glory.²⁶⁷ As part of their trip to al-Hira, Yaqt's informants had also taken in the tomb of al-Numan, the final Hiran king, which was to be found at an even more famous monastery, that of Hind the Younger, where it was said that al-Numan would pray beneath

five hundred gold and silver lamps.²⁶⁸ According to the *Chronicle of Seert*, this Hind was the daughter of al-Numan, while the *Khuzistan Chronicle* asserts that she was the sister. Either way, both sources agree that she was the patron of the monastery that bore her name, in which Ishoyabh, the *catholicos*, was later buried.²⁶⁹

For the demise of al-Numan, which may have taken place between 602 and possibly as late as 606,²⁷⁰ we are dependent on very late sources. Al-Tabari provides the most detailed narrative, a convoluted drama involving the imprisonment of Khusrau's favourite court poet, the famous Adi b. Zayd (previously the secretary to Khusrau I) who passed his time in confinement writing poems that mocked al-Numan.²⁷¹ After realising the terrible mistake he had made by locking Adi up, al-Numan went to release him, only to discover to his horror that Adi had died in his cell. Al-Numan now desperately tried to conceal the truth. Meanwhile, Adi's son, Zayd, sought revenge for his father's death. After further twists and turns, and a dramatic confrontation between al-Numan and Zayd on a bridge, al-Numan was jailed, and later died, apparently of the plague.²⁷² The most colourful end is found in the Persian *Tarikh* of Balami, a translation and embellishment of the history of al-Tabari. It is in this text that the most gruesome of al-Numan's ends appears, with Khusrau ordering elephants to stand on al-Numan and crush him.²⁷³

It has sometimes been thought that Khusrau II turned on al-Numan due to his adoption of Christianity, but for the reasons discussed throughout, this does not seem sufficiently credible. It can also be noted that Khusrau's court contained a number of senior Christian aristocrats, and his wife, Shirin, was a Christian. When Shirin gave birth to their child, Khusrau honoured St Sergius (to whom they had prayed for succour) by dedicating lavish and expensive gifts that were deposited in the sanctuary at Rusafa-Sergiopolis.²⁷⁴ In addition, during his sojourn as Maurice's guest in the Roman empire, Khusrau had enjoyed a close rapport with the bishop Domitianus of Melitene, as well as Gregory, the patriarch of Antioch, who had dedicated an earlier offering from Khusrau to St Sergius at Rusafa, which—tactfully—included the gem-encrusted cross of Justinian and Theodora 'brought here [to Persia] in time of estrangement between the two states... and which was discovered in our treasuries'.²⁷⁵ Instead, the truth concerning al-Numan's end is likely to be found in the murky world of court politics and alliances, an explanation similar to that used to describe the end of the Roman Arab al-Mundhir, above, as well as in the mind of Khusrau, who began to have grandiose plans after he regained the throne and took the title 'Parvez'—'Ever Victorious'.

In its discussion of the civil war between Khusrau II and the general Bahram, the *Khuzistan Chronicle* records that al-Numan refused to help Khusrau as he fled to Roman territory to escape his rival. (Note that in the *Chronicle of Seert*, the family of al-Numan, although not al-Numan himself, had supported the king). The *Khuzistan Chronicle* further asserts that Khusrau's request for a daughter of al-Numan and a 'very noble horse' were also refused. Khusrau, the *Khuzistan Chronicle* continues, 'put all these things together and kept them in his heart'. With substantial help from Maurice, which saw a Roman army fight alongside its erstwhile Persian enemies to restore Khusrau to his throne, Khusrau prevailed in the civil war and swiftly took revenge on those who had not supported him, including al-Numan, who was either poisoned or left in a state of eternal supplication outside the gates of Khusrau's palace.²⁷⁶ According to al-Tabari, Khusrau then installed a governor at al-Hira named al-Nakhirajan, to watch over a pliant Christian bureaucrat called Iyas b. Qabisah.²⁷⁷ A separate view of the end of the Hiran kings that privileges long-term thinking over personal relationships has been suggested by James Howard-Johnston, in that Khusrau's ambitions, which were shifting towards the west and the territory of the Roman empire when Maurice was murdered in 602, may have made a system based on a single family less desirable; once

fighting actually began, and things went well for the Persians, Khusrau's mind was made up. More specifically, Howard-Johnston suggests that:

in the future that [Khusrau] foresaw and for which he was planning... a new system would be needed to manage part or all of the Romans' desert frontier, as Persian armies pushed west and then south. There was no question of managing Arab tribes along the whole inner sweep of the Fertile Crescent through a single royal client and from a single base fronting lower Mesopotamia. The Lakhm could not retain a leading role, given generations of antagonism between them and the Romans' Arab clients.²⁷⁸

Whichever case is to be preferred, the Hiran kings were eminently expendable. In the same way that 'the empire of the Christian *tayyaye*' had collapsed, so now the Persian Arab super-phylarchate vanished into eternity.

Conclusion

Court politics, military drama, and intrigue, then, played a major role in the demise of both al-Mundhir and al-Numan. Their positions were fragile, dependent on imperial goodwill; it is noteworthy that not long before, a Berber leader in newly reconquered Africa, Koutzinas, emerged as a super-phylarch (in this case an 'exarch'), and was paid a handsome gold subsidy, only to suddenly and mysteriously fall from grace in 563, the victim of a Roman assassination plot.²⁷⁹ Whittow and Greatrex have both argued that Magnus was predisposed to getting rid of al-Mundhir in part because he viewed the Arab phylarch as an economic rival. The settlement boom that characterised much of the late antique east, and which has left such a rich record of churches and settlements, was a phenomenon in which al-Harith and his family were deeply involved, as the numerous inscriptions discussed in this chapter show. The phylarchs, in Whittow's view, 'invested in exactly the same way as any other aristocratic speculator', and Magnus' invitation to al-Mundhir to attend a consecration of a church that he had himself funded—an event so normal that it would not raise suspicion—proves Whittow's point. On one side of the coin the Roman Arabs were Roman aristocrats, members of the *illustres*, but on the other, their differences and Bedouin roots were all too easy to use to demonise them when it became necessary.²⁸⁰ In the same way that local rivalries had destroyed the settlement made by al-Mundhir in Constantinople, so similar rivalries between different aristocrats could scupper the career of the Arab leader.²⁸¹ We should not rule out, as well, the potential impact of the Justinianic plague which swept through the Middle East after 542; its most famous survivor was the emperor himself, whose sickness was chronicled by Procopius.²⁸² John of Ephesus, some of whose lost work is preserved in the *Chronicle* of Ps.-Dionysius, recorded that the effects on the countryside were so severe that there were:

cattle abandoned and roaming scattered over the mountains with nobody to gather them [and] flocks of sheep, goats, oxen, and pigs which had become like wild animals, having forgotten (life in) a cultivated land and the human voice which used to lead them.²⁸³

Leaving aside the rhetorical flourishes in this text, as a family whose strength lay in the countryside, it is hard to imagine that al-Harith and al-Mundhir would not have been affected.²⁸⁴ Peter Sarris has pointed to a period of 'major instability in the imperial coinage' for the years during and after the plague's arrival, reflecting a drop in the empire's most important source of tax revenue—that is, taxes based on land and land-usage—itself a reflection of both urban

and rural depopulation.²⁸⁵ Hugh Kennedy, examining the archaeological evidence, notes an 'abrupt' end to the settlement boom so characteristic of late antique Syria.²⁸⁶ On the other hand, it is worth pointing out that after 580, al-Mundhir's son, al-Numan, was able to plunder extensively around Bostra, and John of Ephesus provides an exhaustive list of what was carried away, including a plethora of agricultural products.²⁸⁷ Nevertheless, if there was a squeeze on rural resources because of the plague, this may have intensified rivalries between the family of al-Mundhir and other ambitious aristocrats, leading to a more fierce competition than might otherwise have been the case.

In Persia, the date of al-Numan's removal is uncertain, but was likely c. 602 (or later, in Howard-Johnston's view, as noted above), but prior to the famous battle of Dhu Qar, near Kufa (the precise date is unknown), which saw an army of disaffected Arabs defeat Khusrau's forces in a grim preview of what was to come.²⁸⁸ One reason for favouring an early date is provided by Peter Edwell, who has pointed out that the year 602 was particularly important for Khusrau: in addition to being a possible date of al-Numan's ouster, it also marked the consolidation of Khusrau's power in Persia and the death of his patron Maurice, who had helped him regain his throne.²⁸⁹ This convergence of dates and significant political events recalls the similar confluence of dates and events noted for the Roman Arabs, above.

The sixth century was of tremendous importance for the history of Arab leadership in the Middle East. We shall explore the phenomenon of leadership in greater detail in the final chapter, but it is worth underscoring here that it was during this period that Arab nobles assumed statesman-like roles, mediating in disputes at the highest level, fulfilling the roles of community leaders, and commanding powerful armies that could, at times, follow policies that were wholly independent of the Roman and Persian courts. At the same time, though, it was the very policies of these states that had made such a situation possible. The super-phylarchate resolved all kinds of imperial problems, particularly in defence, but by devolving such a personal degree of royal authority onto Arab nobles, it created a whole new set of unintended consequences. The most important of these was to build states-in-waiting, powerful fiefdoms that emerged chiefly at the edges of empire: the rural districts of Arabia and Syria for the Roman Arabs, the arid deserts and alluvial plains of the Euphrates around the city of al-Hira for their Persian counterparts. This process was sustained by the competition between Rome and Persia, and by the events that took place in Aksum and South Arabia that drew in imperial interests and affected imperial political and religious policies. Had the late antique Great Powers been weaker, it is possible that an al-Mundhir or an al-Numan may have followed the trajectory of Clovis, Theoderic, or other Germanic peoples in the west, who inherited imperial power and transformed it into 'true' royal power, with greater state-like apparatus, such as law codes and bureaucratic government.

Maurice's death gave Khusrau the pretext he was looking for, and he soon invaded the Roman empire ostensibly to 'avenge' his patron. Later legends that found their way into al-Tabari say that Khusrau had a second wife, Maria, who was Maurice's daughter, while the *Khuzistan Chronicle* reports that one of Maurice's sons escaped execution and found his way to the Sasanian court, seeking satisfaction against Phocas.²⁹⁰ Despite early successes, Phocas quickly found himself in trouble in the face of Khusrau's determined assault, and his woes deepened in 608 when Heraclius, son of the exarch of the province of Africa (the territory of the Vandals captured during the reign of Justinian), launched his own revolt against Phocas, who was later paraded naked in front of Heraclius' invasion fleet before being dismembered and dragged through the Hippodrome in Constantinople.²⁹¹

Intense, violent religious passions pervaded the war between Heraclius and Khusrau. Theophanes reported that Heraclius had arrived at Constantinople in 'fortified ships that

had on their masts reliquaries and icons of the Mother of God'.²⁹² The conflict soon took on an apocalyptic character as Constantinople's fate hung in the balance, and large areas of the Roman east, including Edessa, Alexandria, and even the holy city of Jerusalem, were captured and occupied for a generation by Khusrau's forces.²⁹³ Despite repeated entreaties by Heraclius for peace, Khusrau demurred each time, 'for he hoped to seize the Roman state in its entirety'.²⁹⁴ The capture of Jerusalem was, according to Theophanes, a bloody affair that saw the patriarch Zacharias deported to Persia (where he later died), and large parts of the Christian population slaughtered 'through the agency of the Jews'.²⁹⁵ Eventually, in a desperately bold and risky move, Heraclius melted down gold and silver from Constantinople's churches, reinforced his army with troops from the empire's European exarchates, and was able to score a success over Khusrau in 622, even while Khusrau's general Shahrvaraz and his Avar allies continued to squeeze Constantinople from both sides.²⁹⁶ Eventually joined by a large militia of Turks, Heraclius made 'bold, almost foolhardy gambles' that included a surprise invasion of Atropatene (the district between Mesopotamia and the Caspian Sea) and caught Khusrau off guard by allowing his subordinates to watch over Constantinople while he kept up the pressure along the northern limits of Sasanian territory. Before long, Heraclius was charging jubilantly through the Persian heartlands.²⁹⁷ Khusrau went on the run even as the final Persian resistance crumbled, and an ecstatic Heraclius moved from one conquest to the next, loading his soldiers with royal plunder and even recovering three hundred Roman military standards captured by the Persians over the years.²⁹⁸ The doomed Persian king was deposed and executed in 628, 'and thus in slow pain he gave up his wicked soul'.²⁹⁹ Peace between the two states was celebrated as Heraclius triumphantly entered Jerusalem in 629/30, returning the True Cross which had been looted by the Persians when they captured the city sixteen years earlier, and Heraclius took revenge on the Jews by driving them out.³⁰⁰ Arabs and Arab militias had played a small role in this, the last Roman-Persian war of antiquity; and there is no reason to believe that they were not useful here as warriors and militia.³⁰¹ Yet in the same way that the remains of al-Hira only served to highlight its former glories, the fleeting appearances of Arab leaders in the margins of the titanic struggle between Heraclius and Khusrau only serve to underscore the greatness of the vanished super-phylarchs.³⁰²

Notes

- 1 *Synodicon Orientale*, pp. 526–7, trans. after Chabot.
- 2 On this episode see Börm 2016.
- 3 *Synodicon Orientale*, pp. 526–7, trans. after Chabot.
- 4 Ps.-Joshua the Stylite, *Chronicle* 88.
- 5 Ps.-Joshua the Stylite, *Chronicle* 88, trans. Trombley and Watt. For the career of Timostratus see *Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire*, 2: 1119.
- 6 Ps.-Joshua the Stylite, *Chronicle* 79, trans. Trombley and Watt.
- 7 The idea or term 'super-phylarch' was first coined by Nöldeke 1887: 12, as the 'Ober-Phylarch', and the term is used by Lewin 2015: 169.
- 8 See Grouchevoy 1995: 127.
- 9 Jones 1964: 528–9, although as Jones points out, 'illustrious fathers naturally petitioned the emperor to give the same rank to their sons, and the emperor was gracious to youths of illustrious parentage.'
- 10 Haldon 2004: 188, 193; Jones 1964: 529, 543–4; Banaji 2001: 131 and 139.
- 11 Haldon 2011: 204; Gatier 2015.
- 12 Haldon 2004: 190.

- 13 Shahid 1995–2010: 515.
- 14 See Lewin 2015: 172–3. The rank of *lamprotatos* is attached to the Silvanus known from the undated dedication at Anasartha discussed in Chapter 3.
- 15 Lewin 2015: 173; Grouchevoy 1995: 127.
- 16 Geoffrey Greatrex in Edwell *et al.* 2015: 235–6; see too Greatrex 2015: 129–31.
- 17 Sartre 1993: 151; Lewin 2015: 174. *Dux Arabiae*: Sartre 1982: 112, discussed by Lewin 2015: 174.
- 18 Procopius, *Persian Wars* 1.17.40–8; Gatier 2015: 217.
- 19 Malalas, *Chronicle* 18.148/p. 496.
- 20 Fowden (EK) 1999 is the classic examination of the cult.
- 21 al-Shami 2010.
- 22 See Gatier 2015 and Bevan *et al.* 2015.
- 23 Incidentally, this is not the first instance of the use of the title *komes/comes* for a phylarch; one ‘Flavius Kathelgous’ is recorded restoring a building in *c.* 455/6; see Sartre 1993. Another mention of this individual is also known; see Grouchevoy 1995: 124.
- 24 Gatier 2015: 204–5 points out that *paneuphemos* was a grade usually given to consuls, holders of the title *patrikios*, and sometimes *duces*.
- 25 *Wadd.* 2110. For the building see Genequand 2015: 190–1.
- 26 Gatier 2015: 206.
- 27 *IGLS* 4.1550. See Millar 2010b: 218 and Gatier 2015: 208.
- 28 Procopius, *Persian Wars* 1.17.40, trans. Dewing.
- 29 Procopius, *Persian Wars* 1.17.44, trans. Dewing.
- 30 Procopius, *Persian Wars* 1.17.30, trans. Dewing.
- 31 Procopius, *Persian Wars* 2.28.12–4, trans. Dewing.
- 32 Avner *et al.* 2013: 252; Millar 2013a: 28–31.
- 33 Theophanes, *Chronicle* AM 5990/p. 141, trans. Mango and Scott; Evagrius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.36, trans. Whitby.
- 34 Theophanes, *Chronicle* AM 5990/p. 141, trans. Mango and Scott.
- 35 Avner *et al.* 2013: 248.
- 36 Theophanes, *Chronicle* AM 5990/p. 141, trans. Mango and Scott; Nappo 2009. Nappo 2015a argues that further Roman intervention would be required, later, to ensure Roman rule over Iotabe.
- 37 Elton 2014: 244; Nonnosus = Photius, *Bibliotheca*, 3; Bowersock 2013: 138–9. The career of this remarkable diplomatic family is recounted in Bowersock 2013: 135–43.
- 38 Theophanes, *Chronicle* AM 5994/p. 144.
- 39 Theophanes, *Chronicle* AM 5994/p. 144, trans. Mango and Scott.
- 40 Ibn Habib, *Kitab al-Muhabbar*, p. 370.
- 41 al-Yaqubi, *Tarikh* 1. pp. 234–6. See Hoyland 2009b: 384–8.
- 42 Avner *et al.* 2013: 249.
- 43 Ps.-Joshua the Stylite, *Chronicle* 51–3, trans. Trombley and Watt.
- 44 Ps.-Joshua the Stylite, *Chronicle* 57–8, trans. Trombley and Watt.
- 45 Ps.-Joshua the Stylite, *Chronicle* 57–8, trans. Trombley and Watt.
- 46 Ps.-Joshua the Stylite, *Chronicle* 57–8, trans. Trombley and Watt.
- 47 According to Trimmingham 1979: 271, this individual was Abu Yafur b. Alqama, who was subsequently replaced by Alamoundaros in 505.
- 48 The name is spelled in any number of different ways; for the sake of clarity, except when quoting, I will refer to the Persian Arab leader as ‘Alamoundaros’.
- 49 Likely a reference to a paternal grandmother. See Robin 2008a: 184–5.

- 50 Cyril of Scythopolis, *Life of John the Hesychast* 13, trans. Price.
- 51 Theophanes, *Chronicle* AM 6005/pp. 157–8, trans. Mango and Scott.
- 52 Ps.-Zachariah, *Chronicle*, 8.5a trans. Phenix and Horn.
- 53 Nonnosus = Photius, *Bibliotheca* 3; Shahid 1964: 115–31; Shahid 1995–2010, vol. 1: 40–2; Fowden (EK) 1999: 87.
- 54 *RIÉth* 191, trans. Robin and Mackinson in Robin 2015b: 156.
- 55 Masal 2 = Ry 510. See Robin 2015b: 156.
- 56 Robin 2015b: 157–8. See also Rubin 1989: 400.
- 57 Nebes 2010: 44.
- 58 Ps.-Dionysius, *Chronicle* 56, trans. Witakowski.
- 59 Nebes 2010: 40; Robin *et al.* 2014: 1053.
- 60 Robin 2012b: 307; Robin *et al.* 2014: 1048–52; al-Azmeh 2014b: 111, 147; cf. Webb 2016: 84.
- 61 Ja 1028, trans. Robin and Mackinson in Robin 2015b: 158–9.
- 62 Bir Hima Sab 1; see Robin *et al.* 2014: 1058.
- 63 *Quran*, 85.4 mentions ‘the people of the trench’, sometimes understood to be a reference to the trench dug by Joseph at Najran (see below) although see Bowersock 2017: 113; sura 96 is also usually connected with the massacres. See Sizgorich 2010, Nebes 2010: 48–9, and Robin 2015f: 54–63.
- 64 Simeon died in 540; his hagiographer was John of Ephesus, who wrote of Simeon in about 560; the hagiography can be found in *PO* 17. See Saint-Laurent 2015: 80–95.
- 65 Shahid 1971: 31–3.
- 66 Taylor 2010; Millar 2013a.
- 67 Ps.-Zachariah, *Chronicle* 8.3a–b, trans. Phenix and Horn. For the *Martyrdom of Arethas* see Detoraki 2010 and the translation by Detoraki (2007).
- 68 al-Tabari, 1.925, trans. Bosworth.
- 69 al-Tabari, 1.925–6.
- 70 Ps.-Zachariah, *Chronicle* 3.d, trans. Phenix and Horn.
- 71 Roman involvement is unclear; al-Tabari makes the claim, 1.926.
- 72 al-Tabari, 1.927–8.
- 73 For a translation of this text see Robin 2015b: 160–2; see also Procopius, *Persian Wars* 1.20; Bowersock 2013: 98.
- 74 *CIH* 621. See Robin 2015b: 162–3. This text is not without its controversies: for the view that the text reflects fortification operations *against* a likely Aksumite attack, see Nebes 2010: 50–2. In this view, the statement ‘returned from Abyssinia’ in the text would refer not to a return of exiles, but the flight of pro-Yusuf clans from western Yemen.
- 75 al-Tabari, 1.928.
- 76 Malalas, *Chronicle* 18.32/p. 445; Theophanes, *Chronicle* AM 6021/p. 178.
- 77 Kennedy and Riley 1990: 118–19.
- 78 Ps.-Zachariah, *Chronicle* 9.2b, trans. Phenix and Horn.
- 79 Malalas, *Chronicle* 18.26/p. 442.
- 80 Trimmingham 1979: 192.
- 81 Malalas, *Chronicle* 18.16/ pp. 434–5, trans. Jeffreys *et al.* The episode is also reported by Theophanes, *Chronicle* AM 6021/pp. 177–9.
- 82 Malalas, *Chronicle* 18.35/pp. 466–7; Sartre 1982: 168–70.
- 83 Cyril of Scythopolis, *Life of St Euthymius* 51.
- 84 Lewin 2015: 172–3.

- 85 See Bloch 2008.
- 86 For the most recent reading of this important inscription, see Michael Macdonald in Fiema *et al.* 2015: 412–13. For the change in date, see Robin *et al.* 2014: 1045, n. 10. See also Macdonald 2010b.
- 87 Gatier 2015.
- 88 Geoffrey Greatrex, in Edwell *et al.* 2015: 235; Nappo 2009.
- 89 For the family, see Bowersock 2013: 135–43. See too the summary and discussion of Nonnosus' activities in Bowersock 2012: 22–5, and Millar 2010b: 207–9.
- 90 See the fascinating article by Paul Yule (Yule 2013a) on a relief discovered at Zafar, perhaps dating from the reign of Sumuyafa Ashwa.
- 91 *Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire*, 3a: 731 (Iulianus 8).
- 92 Procopius, *Persian Wars* 1.20.9, trans. Dewing.
- 93 Procopius, *Persian Wars* 1.20.9–11, trans. Dewing.
- 94 Procopius, *Persian Wars* 1.19.16, trans. Dewing.
- 95 Nonnosus = Photius, *Bibliotheca* 3, trans. Freese.
- 96 Nonnosus = Photius, *Bibliotheca* 3; Bowersock 2013: 139.
- 97 Robin 2012a: 37, 41–4; see Beaucamp 2010: 204–6.
- 98 Nonnosus = Photius, *Bibliotheca* 3; Bowersock 2013: 140.
- 99 Malalas, *Chronicle* 18.56/pp. 457–8.
- 100 Laila Nehmé in Fiema *et al.* 2015: 388, discussing Robin 2008a: 174, n. 39. See Procopius, *Persian Wars* 1.19.10.
- 101 Robin 2008a: 193; Greatrex 2015: 132; Lewin 2015: 182.
- 102 Malalas, *Chronicle* 18.60/p. 461.
- 103 Malalas, *Chronicle* 18.60/p. 463.
- 104 Malalas, *Chronicle* 18.60/p. 464.
- 105 Procopius, *Persian Wars* 1.18.35–36, trans. Dewing. Cf. Evagrius, *Ecclesiastical History* 4.13, who assigns the blame more generally to the army ignoring the instructions of Belisarius.
- 106 Lewin 2015: 177.
- 107 Malalas, *Chronicle* 18.59/pp. 460–1. Millar 2013c: 146 notes an earlier episode featuring Christians kidnapped from the region around Edessa, who were similarly ransomed.
- 108 Lewin 2015: 178.
- 109 Procopius, *Persian Wars* 2.1.1–11, trans. Dewing.
- 110 al-Tabari, 1.958–9, trans. Bosworth; Alamoundaros: Procopius, *Persian Wars* 2.1.12–15.
- 111 Unfortunately Rusafa has also suffered from looting and damage in the Syrian war. For example, see www.asor-syrianheritage.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/ASOR_CHI_Weekly_Report_28r.pdf (accessed February 25, 2019).
- 112 Fowden (EK) 1999: 26.
- 113 Fowden (EK) 1999: 92.
- 114 Evagrius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 4.28 and 6.21; Fowden (EK) 1999: 132.
- 115 *Life of Ahudemmeh* = PO 3, p. 29, trans. after Nau; Fowden (EK) 1999: 96. See Theophylact Simocatta, *History* 5.1.7. For the Arab-Islamic tradition (with references) see Trimmingham 1979: 236, and n. 60 there.
- 116 Theophylact Simocatta, *History* 5.14.3, trans. Whitby.
- 117 Notably, Qasr Serij, along with other northern Iraqi churches, was closer in style to churches found in the neighbouring Roman provinces than those to the south and in the Gulf, which can be differentiated on the basis of their construction. See the very useful discussion in Toral-Niehoff 2010: 334–6.

- 118 Denha, *Life of Maruta* = PO 3, pp. 85–6. Quote from Fowden (EK) 1999: 125.
- 119 *Life of Ahudemmeh* = PO 3, p. 31; see also John of Ephesus, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.6.20.
- 120 Oates 1962: 88; Fowden (EK) 1999: 127. See too Fowden (EK) 2013: 401–2.
- 121 Evagrius, *Ecclesiastical History* 4.28, trans. Whitby.
- 122 Evagrius, *Ecclesiastical History* 4.28, trans. Whitby; Procopius, *Persian Wars* 2.20.1–16. Procopius calls this individual Ambrus, but there is no indication that this man was the son of Alamoundaros, of the same name.
- 123 Procopius, *Persian Wars* 2.28.7–11.
- 124 Procopius, *Persian Wars* 2.19.15–6.
- 125 Procopius, *Persian Wars* 2.19.15–30.
- 126 Procopius, *Persian Wars* 2.28.12–4, trans. Dewing.
- 127 Piccirillo 2001: 284.
- 128 For a recent discussion see Genequand 2015: 195–6.
- 129 Gatier 2015: 214.
- 130 For John’s fascinating life see Saint-Laurent 2015: 72–9.
- 131 Note that there is also a later hagiography of Jacob, attributed by its anonymous author to John of Ephesus, but since it was likely written at some point between 628 and 741, this is impossible. See Saint-Laurent 2015: 99.
- 132 Philip Wood in Fisher and Wood *et al.* 2015: 315; Wood (P) 2014b: 362–3.
- 133 Since a Chalcedonian bishop occupied the see of Edessa, John could not, practically, take up this position. See Saint-Laurent 2015: 98.
- 134 Millar 2013a: 23, and 30, for the church at Jabiya; see too Hoyland 2009a: 128.
- 135 The phrase is from Saint-Laurent 2015: 98, reflecting the image provided by John’s hagiography.
- 136 Philip Wood in Fisher and Wood *et al.* 2015: 316.
- 137 Michael the Syrian, *Chronicle*, pp. 246–7; Wood (P) 2014b: 359–60.
- 138 Leontius of Jerusalem, *Testimonies of the Saints*, discussed by Millar 2013b: 55.
- 139 See Millar 2013b: 82–5; Millar 2009; van Roey and Allen 1994: 267–303.
- 140 van Rompay 2005: 254.
- 141 Trans. Millar 2009: 106.
- 142 Millar 2009: 106–7.
- 143 Millar 2013c: 148–9, with an English translation of the document.
- 144 See the invaluable contribution by Millar 2009, with an English translation of all 137 subscriptions.
- 145 Millar 2009: 112.
- 146 Genequand 2006: 70 and Millar 2013a: 20.
- 147 Schlumberger 1986; see the detailed discussion in Genequand 2006.
- 148 See the plans in Genequand 2006: 73, 75, and 76.
- 149 34°22’44.27”N, 37°36’47.65”E.
- 150 In homage to the Flavian dynasty of Constantine, as discussed in Chapter 3.
- 151 *IGLS* 5.2553 B, D, trans. Genequand, rev. Gatier 2015. For the acclamation see Gatier 2015: 198. For the site see Genequand 2006. The inscriptions are now in the National Museum in Damascus, although nobody has been able to see them for some time (even prior to the war).
- 152 *IGLS* 5.2553, A; Millar 2009: 112.
- 153 Gatier 2015: 197.

- 154 See Gatier 2015: 200–1, and Whittow 2015: 26: ‘on the rare occasions that we can identify a Jafnid site by an inscription it looks like any other complex built by the Roman elite.’
- 155 Hoyland 2009a: 119, 128, and at 122 and 123, with very useful maps of the locations of the monasteries referenced in ‘the Letter of the Archimandrites’.
- 156 Gatier 2015: 201.
- 157 Whittow 2015: 22.
- 158 *SEG* 43.1089, trans. Bevan. See Sartre 1993, who points out (at 151) that the formula used in the inscription is derived from Psalm 120.8.
- 159 Sartre 1993: 151.
- 160 Kaimio 2001; Fiema *et al.* 2015: 424–5.
- 161 Millar 2013a: 23.
- 162 Robin 2015b: 153–4; Robin 2015c: 218; Robin 2014a: 72.
- 163 Cf. Bowersock 2013: 112.
- 164 *RIÉth* 192. See Robin 2015b: 167–9; Procopius, *Persian Wars* 1.20.8.
- 165 In a sharp anticipation of the religious and political turmoil to come, Glen Bowersock has characterised the absence of the peninsular Arabs in terms of ‘their many divinities’ providing no centrifugal force to ‘hold them together.’ See Bowersock 2013: 115; Bowersock 2012: 26.
- 166 *CIH* 541. See the new translation of this text in Robin 2015b: 164–7.
- 167 Hoyland 2014: 277.
- 168 Procopius, *Persian Wars* 1.20.13, trans. Dewing; Bowersock 2013: 116; Gajda 2009: 117.
- 169 Murayghan 1 = Ry 506, trans. Robin 2015b: 169.
- 170 Hoyland 2014: 276; Olinder 1927: 63; Robin 2014: 68.
- 171 Murayghan 3, trans. Robin 2015b: 169–70.
- 172 Robin 2015e; Robin 2017a; Robin 2010b: 216; Fowden (EK) 2013: 413. According to *CIH* 541, l. 66–7, Abraha also consecrated a church at Marib; see the translation of this text in Robin 2015b: 166.
- 173 Ibn Ishaq, *Sira* 35–6, trans. Guillaume.
- 174 Robin 2010b: 230; Robin 2015f: 45–6.
- 175 *Quran*, 105, trans. Jones. See Robin 2015f: 37–9 and Robin 2014a: 66.
- 176 Robin 2015b: 152. The event is examined in detail in Robin 2010b, who offers this date range at 241. See also Robin *et al.* 2014: 1060–1.
- 177 Robin *et al.* 2014: 1060–2 and Robin 2015f: 46–8, with figs. 2, 3, and 4.
- 178 Robin 2010b: 241.
- 179 See Howard-Johnston 2010: 59–66.
- 180 The three versions of the story are to be found in Michael the Syrian, *Chronicle*, p. 269; *Chronicle to 1234*, p. 192; Bar Hebraeus, *Chronicle* 81.
- 181 van Ginkel 1995: 54.
- 182 See now Millar 2014.
- 183 *Life of Symeon the Stylite the Younger* 186–7/pp. 165–6, trans. Fisher.
- 184 Menander, fragment 6.1.
- 185 Menander, fragment 6.1
- 186 For example, as explained by Malalas, *Chronicle* 18.61/pp. 466–7, and see too Procopius, *Persian Wars* 2.10.23.
- 187 Menander, fragment 6.1.

- 188 Fisher 2011a: 119–21 and 2011b; for *symmachoi*, see Greatrex 1998b: 26 and Greatrex 2014b.
- 189 Malalas, *Chronicle* 18.148/p. 496; Theophanes, *Chronicle* AM 6056/p. 240.
- 190 Ps.-Dionysius, *Chronicle* 110, trans. Witakowski.
- 191 Menander, fragment 9.3.
- 192 John of Ephesus, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.6.3. The episode is also recounted by the *Chronicle of 640* = Palmer 1993: 15.
- 193 Greatrex 2015: 141. Procopius famously commented on the requirement for Berber leaders to obtain Roman royal insignia to underwrite their right to rule. See Procopius, *Vandal Wars* 3.25.5.
- 194 Greatrex 2015: 133.
- 195 John of Ephesus, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.6.3, trans. after Brooks.
- 196 Greatrex 2015: 140.
- 197 John of Ephesus, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.6.3–4, trans. after Brooks.
- 198 *CIH* 325 (=Robin 2015b: 170–1). See also Robin 2015e; al-Tabari, 1.935, trans. Bosworth. Fowden (EK) 2013: 411–13 discusses the church and its likely appearance. Finster 2010: 77, figs. 9 and 10, discusses the re-use of capitals from Sanaa’s churches in the city’s Great Mosque.
- 199 No relation to Theophanes the Confessor whose *Chronicle* is widely quoted here.
- 200 Theophanes, *Historika* = Photius, *Bibliotheca* 64, trans. Freese.
- 201 Robin 2012b: 297.
- 202 Ibn Hisham, *Sirat rasul Allah*, pp. 41–3, trans. Hoyland in Hoyland 2014: 274. Al-Tabari, 1.946–9, also reports the story of Sayf ibn dhu-Yazan, adding the detail that he had tried first to persuade the Roman emperor to intervene, and then went to al-Hira. See Hamza al-Isfahani, *Tarikh*, pp. 58–9 (=Hoyland 2018: 72).
- 203 Hoyland 2014: 275.
- 204 Bowersock 2013: 117.
- 205 See the discussion in Munt 2017: 276.
- 206 Robin 2015b: 152.
- 207 John of Ephesus, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.6.5.
- 208 John of Ephesus, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.6.4, trans. after Brooks.
- 209 For Justinian see *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire*, 3a: 744 (Iustinianus 3).
- 210 *SEG* 7.188. The cemetery and the building are not related, as Konrad 2015 shows.
- 211 It is noteworthy that while St Sergius received a great deal of the family’s attention, inscriptions show that they also supported the cults of St George and St Sabinianos. See Gatier 2015: 218. For the date of the building, see Konrad 2015: 242.
- 212 Konrad 2015: 244.
- 213 Konrad 2015: 243.
- 214 Whittow 1999: 222; see also Fowden (EK) 2000.
- 215 Fowden (EK) 2000: 315.
- 216 Fowden (EK) 1999; Wood (P) 2014b.
- 217 Fowden (EK) 1999: 96–7.
- 218 Nonnosus = Photius, *Bibliotheca* 3, trans. Freese.
- 219 Diodorus, 3.42.
- 220 Fowden (EK) 2000: 314; Konrad 2015: 240. Cf. al-Azmeh 2014b: 130; Donner 2010: 30.
- 221 John of Ephesus, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.6.4, trans. after Brooks. Fowden (EK) 2013: 404–5 suggests that al-Mundhir would not have ‘missed the occasion’ to receive the

- Roman emissary inside his own building, north of the city's walls. For the date of Basilica A and its relationship to Basilica B and other structures at Rusafa, see Fowden (EK) 1999: 84–5; see too Brands 2011: 59.
- 222 John of Ephesus, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.6.4.
- 223 John of Ephesus, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.6.4.
- 224 Michael the Syrian, *Chronicle*, pp. 370–1. Chabot, in n. 4 at this point, suggests that there might be crossover or conflation with the text of John of Ephesus, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.4.41.
- 225 Theophylact Simocatta, *History* 3.17.9, 3.17.7, trans. Whitby and Whitby.
- 226 Evagrius, *Ecclesiastical History* 5.20, trans. Whitby.
- 227 John of Ephesus, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.6.16–7 and 3.3.40–3.
- 228 Sartre 1982: 189.
- 229 John of Ephesus, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.6.18.
- 230 *Chronicle to 1234*, p. 210.
- 231 See Shahid 1995–2010, vol. 1: 782–4.
- 232 John of Ephesus, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.4.36; Segal 1984: 122.
- 233 On this term see Millar 2013b: 54–6.
- 234 John of Ephesus, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.4.39, trans. after Brooks. For a detailed examination of these problems see Allen 2000, van Rompay 2005, Frend 1972, and Shahid 1995–2010 vol. 1: 876–906. John's narrative is structured in a somewhat confusing way, which is teased out and examined by Millar 2010b: 216–8.
- 235 John of Ephesus, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.4.39; Wood (P) 2014b: 359.
- 236 John of Ephesus, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.4.42.
- 237 *Wadd.* 2562c, trans. Gatier 2015 (see also Fisher and Wood *et al.* 2015).
- 238 *IGLS* 4.1550. See Millar 2010b: 218 and Gatier 2015: 208–9.
- 239 John of Ephesus, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.4.40, trans. after Brooks.
- 240 Further adding confusion over whether al-Mundhir made one or two visits to Constantinople, Michael the Syrian, *Chronicle*, p. 370, adds the specific details that al-Mundhir 'demanded of the emperor to end persecution', while John of Ephesus, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.4.42, mentions al-Mundhir asking Tiberius to intercede 'for the peace of the church' (trans. after Brooks).
- 241 John of Ephesus, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.4.42, trans. after Brooks.
- 242 Whittow 2015: 26.
- 243 Gatier 2015: 216.
- 244 John of Ephesus, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.3.40, trans. after Brooks.
- 245 John of Ephesus, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.3.41, trans. after Brooks. The story is repeated with only minor variations by Bar Hebraeus, *Chronicle* 88–9.
- 246 Southern 2008: 160.
- 247 John of Ephesus, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.4.42. Al-Numan's raids are also recorded by John Moschus, *The Spiritual Meadow* 155.
- 248 John of Ephesus, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.4.43; Michael the Syrian, *Chronicle*, p. 374; *Chronicle to 1234*, p. 211, for a slightly different view.
- 249 Evagrius, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.2; *Chronicle to 1234*, p. 213.
- 250 Theophylact Simocatta, *History* 8.11.1–6; *Chronicle to 1234*, p. 219.
- 251 Michael the Syrian, *Chronicle*, pp. 374, trans. after Chabot.
- 252 Michael the Syrian, *Chronicle*, pp. 374–5. See also *Chronicle to 1234*, p. 213; Wood (P) 2014b: 360.

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- 253 Michael the Syrian, *Chronicle*, pp. 373–4, trans. after Chabot. The same information is repeated by Bar Hebraeus, *Chronicle*, p. 89.
- 254 Theophylact Simocatta, *History* 2.2.5, trans. Whitby and Whitby.
- 255 *Chronicle to 1234*, p. 219.
- 256 Michael the Syrian, *Chronicle*, pp. 383–4. The story also appears in *Chronicle to 1234*, pp. 215–16. See also Hoyland 2009a: 129.
- 257 Gascou 1994. For a recent discussion see Gatier 2015: 215 and for Saracens in the eastern Egyptian desert see Power 2011.
- 258 Wood (P) 2016.
- 259 Near Kirkuk.
- 260 *Chronicle of Seert* = *PO* 13, pp. 468–9, trans. after Scher. For Bahram see McDonough 2011: 309, discussing Pourshariati 2008.
- 261 See Brands 2011: 62 for a discussion.
- 262 *Chronicle to 1234*, p. 215; for the graffito see Gatier 2015: 209–11. The story also appears in Agapius, *Kitab al-Unwan*, p. 182.
- 263 *Chronicle of Seert* = *PO* 13, pp. 479–80, trans. after Scher.
- 264 *Chronicle of Seert* = *PO* 13, pp. 480–1, trans. after Scher. See on this text Philip Wood in Fisher and Wood *et al.* 2015: 360–1.
- 265 This fascinating text is examined by Isabel Toral-Niehoff in Munt *et al.* 2015: 490–6.
- 266 Evagrius, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.22, trans. Whitby.
- 267 Yaqt, *Mujam al-buldan* 2, p. 709. On this text see Harry Munt in Munt *et al.* 2015: 465–6.
- 268 Fowden (EK) 2013: 407.
- 269 *Chronicle of Seert* = *PO* 13, p. 442; *Khuzistan Chronicle*, p. 16.
- 270 Howard-Johnston 2010: 437.
- 271 Adi's family had helped Khusrau in the war against Bahram, and thus the king was favourably disposed towards him. See Trimmingham 1979: 199–200; Robin 2012b: 307.
- 272 al-Tabari, 1.1018–29.
- 273 Balami, *Tarikh*, pp. 818–9.
- 274 Theophylact Simocatta, *History* 5.14.
- 275 Fowden (EK) 2000: 319. For the earlier offering, see Evagrius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 6.22, appended to the description of al-Numan's conversion; quotation from Theophylact Simocatta, *History* 5.13.4–6, trans. Whitby and Whitby.
- 276 *Khuzistan Chronicle*, pp. 19–20, trans. M. Greatrex (=Greatrex and Lieu 2002: 213–2).
- 277 al-Tabari, 1.1038.
- 278 Howard-Johnston 2010: 437–41, quote from 438.
- 279 The career of Koutzinas is explored by Whittow 2015: 27–8 and Modéran 2003: 335–50, 665–6.
- 280 Whittow 2015: 25–6; Greatrex 2015: 135–7.
- 281 Greatrex 2015: 138.
- 282 Procopius, *Persian Wars* 2.22–33, gives a full and detailed account. For the plague and the Roman Arabs more generally, see Fisher 2015.
- 283 Ps.-Dionysius, *Chronicle* 87–8, trans. Witakowski.
- 284 Conrad 1994.
- 285 Sarris 2002: 175–7.
- 286 Kennedy 2007.
- 287 John of Ephesus, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.3.42. See also Fisher 2011a: 186–93.

- 288 Fisher 2011a: 184–6; al-Azmeh 2014b: 119; see the very interesting discussion of this event in Webb 2016: 88–95.
- 289 Peter Edwell in Edwell *et al.* 2105: 270.
- 290 al-Tabari, 1.995; *Khuzistan Chronicle*, p. 20. The Roman wife, ‘Maria’, is also mentioned by the *Khuzistan Chronicle*, p. 17.
- 291 *Chronicon Paschale*, pp. 700–1.
- 292 Theophanes, *Chronicle* AM 6102/p. 298, trans. Mango and Scott.
- 293 On Jerusalem see the recent discussion in Bowersock 2017: 81–100.
- 294 Theophanes, *Chronicle* AM 6105/p. 300, trans. Mango and Scott.
- 295 Theophanes, *Chronicle* AM 6106/p. 301, trans. Mango and Scott.
- 296 Theophanes, *Chronicle* AM 6112–3/pp. 303–5.
- 297 Theophanes, *Chronicle* AM 6118/p. 317; Howard-Johnston 2010: 442–3.
- 298 Theophanes, *Chronicle* AM 6118/p. 322.
- 299 Theophanes, *Chronicle* AM 6118/p. 327, trans. Mango and Scott.
- 300 Theophanes, *Chronicle* AM 6120/p. 328, quote from p. 329, trans. Mango and Scott.
- 301 E.g. Theophanes, *Chronicle*, AM 6114/p. 307. See Greatrex 2015: 143.
- 302 E.g. for Arabs on campaign in the war: Theophylact Simocatta, *History* 2.10.6–7; Theophanes, *Chronicle* AM 6113/pp. 303–6; *Chronicon Paschale*, 730; Michael the Syrian, *Chronicle*, p. 376.

5 Legacy

Introduction

Between the defeat of Mithridates and the triumph of Heraclius, the political geography of the Middle East underwent a series of profound changes. Many of these were driven by the interests and policies of the dominant states and empires of the time: Rome, Parthian and Sasanian Persia, Himyar, and, to a lesser extent, the kingdom of Aksum. The petty kingdoms, confederations, princely states, and wandering groups which had characterised the political map in the first century BC had, by the sixth century CE, almost completely vanished. Their disappearance was a result of imperial ambition, episodic bouts of interstate warfare and intercommunal religious violence, as well as the more prosaic realities of frontier politics and the changing demands of administrative arrangements.

Against the background of these diverse and variegated changes, the focus of this book has been directed towards one of the most important developments in the history of the pre-Islamic Middle East—the collapse of the middle ground between Rome and Persia and the resulting emergence of Arab leaders, individuals in whom an emperor might choose to confide, or from whom to take military advice; or to whom one might turn to seek help, mediating an ecclesiastical dispute that threatened the peace of the church. Such situations would have been unthinkable in the Middle East of Pompey, Trajan, or Ardashir. The fact that Arab leaders came to assume such prominent positions was primarily a result of imperial policies that actively sought to co-opt elites, and use them as a low-cost and relatively safe way to outsource frontier defence. From such beginnings, and from being initially passive ‘consumers’ of state policy with little leverage to affect the course of events, Arab (super-) phylarchs eventually became active participants who influenced the social, political, and religious cultures in which they lived. As part of this change, kings of tribes, places, or groups, such as Hujr, ‘king of Kinda’, or Mara al-Qays, ‘king of *Arab*’, disappeared. In their stead emerged newly elevated princes directly appointed by state authorities, and whose claims to royal titles extended only as far as the goodwill of the emperors whom they served. Even as active participants in imperial affairs, they were still clearly subordinate, as the fates of al-Mundhir and al-Numan show; but with the Arab super-phylarchates of the sixth century came the first momentous step in the establishment of Arab rulership over larger communities, bounded by a common faith and a common interest.¹

At the same time that al-Mundhir fought Qabus and petitioned Justin II for gold, and the kingdom sustained by Abraha collapsed under the mismanagement of his sons and a Persian invasion, another, far more important Arab leader, was born, in about 570 or 573. This was the Prophet Muhammad, whose lifetime spanned the demise of the super-phylarchates and the last great Romano-Persian war of antiquity. Even though Theophanes derided

Muhammad as the ‘false prophet of the Saracens’, he was free from the pressures and bureaucratic requirements of an imperial suzerain, and Muhammad and his message united the tribes of Arabia, realising the political potential of universal Arab rule that had briefly flickered, however dimly, in the phylarchal fiefdoms of al-Mundhir and al-Numan.² By the time that the *muhajirun* surged northwards in search of conquest, Rome and Persia were so utterly exhausted by a generation of savage conflict that neither state was able to mount an effective resistance.³

Measuring legacies

There are many different ways by which the legacy and relevance of the pre-Islamic period to later Middle Eastern (and indeed world) history can be measured. One approach is to examine the changes that took place as the Romano-Persian east gave way to the establishment of Muslim rule. Medieval city planning, for example, departed considerably from the neat grids and public spaces that were common to the earlier Graeco-Roman cities. In Persia, Zoroastrianism suffered a ‘precipitous disintegration’, largely because of its intimate proximity to a state that underwent a spectacular collapse.⁴ There were many other significant changes, but it is in the continuities that legacies can sometimes best be measured. Some continuities are more visible in the fifth and sixth centuries: while Hegra was abandoned by late antiquity, the situation was different at Petra, as the exceptional portrait of continued vitality preserved in the elaborate mosaics of the Petra Church and the Petra Papyri discovered there show, together with evidence for the activities of Petra’s Christian community, which included repurposing the Urn Tomb as a place of Christian worship.⁵ Other continuities addressing the transition from the sixth to the seventh centuries and after are similarly well known, such as the persistence of Christian and Jewish communities under Muslim rule. Here we can also recall the late dates of the churches excavated so far at al-Hira, the growth of monastic activity in the Gulf, and point to the discovery of a seventh-century monastery at Kilwa, near Tabuk in Saudi Arabia.⁶ There were also continuities in forms of coinage struck by the early Islamic rulers,⁷ and the ways in which the military camps known as *amsar* were related to Roman fortress plans.⁸ Vivid examples of continuity are provided in art and architecture as well. The splendid Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, for example—once a temple to Hadad, then to Jupiter, and then a church which became associated with the relics of St John the Baptist, whose shrine can be found within the modern mosque—was quite literally built on a space that had been sacred for centuries, adding a new layer of hallowed ground to its predecessors.⁹ Even today, the soaring remains of the propylaeum of the Temple of Jupiter still stand near the entrance to the *suq* and adjacent to a group of Quran sellers, as a permanent reminder of the continuities between different periods (Figure 5.1).

Another famous example of continuity is the elaborate eighth-century mosaic at the church of St Stephen at Umm ar-Rasas in Jordan, which portrays the cities of the Roman Middle East. Created in a time when Muslims had gained decisive control of the region, the images and names would have made sense to a Roman living two centuries earlier¹⁰ (Figures 5.2).

Still another famous visual representation of continuity is found within the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Qusayr Amra in Jordan, whose riotously vibrant frescos once again underscore the vitality of Middle Eastern Hellenism, the cultural legacy of Alexander the Great and the Roman empire (Figure 5.3).¹¹

In this chapter I will go into some detail about a particular strand of continuity that links the pre-Islamic Middle East and its Islamic successor: Arab leadership. This phenomenon



Figure 5.1 The remains of the propylaeum of the Temple of Jupiter, outside the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus. Photograph by the author.

receives little attention in discussions of continuities and changes between the pre-Islamic and Islamic periods, yet it is, in my view, one of the most useful and interesting ways to measure the legacy of what has been discussed in this book. Before we get to that, though, it is worth highlighting some of the other ways to gauge that legacy, many of which are thriving—and bitterly contested—research areas in modern historical study.

Early Islam and late antiquity

The history of early Islam is notoriously difficult to wrest from the surviving sources and laden with ideological concerns since 9/11.¹² Having said that, in many ways the career and message of the Prophet, and the establishment in the Middle East and further afield of the Muslim *umma*—the community of believers—comprise the legacy *par excellence* of the late antique world. Like Jesus at the turn of the first millennium, Muhammad's voice was not alone and there were a number of competing 'monotheist leader-prophets'. These included the prophet Musaylima from al-Yamama, who claimed that the angel Gabriel provided him with a revelation which he called a *quran*, and whose god was known as al-Rahman, a term borrowed from the theological language of the kingdom of Himyar.¹³ It was Muhammad's voice that prevailed, however, and for the faith that he preached, Muhammad would be



Figure 5.2 Detail of the mosaic floor in the eighth-century church of St Stephen at Umm ar-Rasas, showing Madaba (bottom), Philadelphia (Amman, middle), and Kastron Mefaa (Umm ar-Rasas). Photograph by the author.



Figure 5.3 Fresco at Qusayr Amra. Photograph by the author.

regarded within the *umma* as the last of God's prophets. Islam can therefore be seen as a monotheism intrinsically intertwined with its Abrahamic forerunners.¹⁴

There were important regional, political precursors to the development of Islam: indeed, from the viewpoint of an historian of the late antique Middle East, it is of great interest that Islam was apparently born at the hollow nexus of tristate competition in central Arabia—the very place where the competing interests of Rome, Persia, and Himyar had simmered for centuries, but where the declining fortunes of all three had left a precipitate vacuum. The importance of the Great Powers is further underlined by the fact that the rapid expansion of the *umma* was perfectly in tune with one of the main themes of period, that is, vigorous military action against one's neighbours. Indeed, from the war between Anastasius and Kavadh at the turn of the sixth century to the tortured series of events that ended with Heraclius triumphant in Jerusalem, the armies of Rome, Persia, Himyar, and Aksum had constantly been involved in extensive, long-lasting, and devastating military campaigns. At the time of the conquests of the *muhajirun*, the Middle East was a chaotic place whose vicious wars for cities, holy places, and imperial provinces had killed thousands and displaced entire communities.¹⁵

For scholars of early Islam the question has long been one of the Arabian uniqueness of Islam versus its relationship to broader events and themes contemporary to the late antique Middle East, and within this sliding scale there are various competing positions.¹⁶ For example, in his complex and rich work *The Emergence of Islam in Late Antiquity*, Aziz Al-Azmeh coined the term 'Paleo-Islam' to discuss the early phase of the new monotheism which, he argued, was 'in Late Antiquity'. At the same time, al-Azmeh firmly emphasised Islam's Arabian origins.¹⁷ Other studies have drawn attention to the 'bleakness' of Islam's world-view, a reflection of the 'harsh environment' of the Arabian deserts in contrast to the prevailing currents of Christianity and Judaism.¹⁸ Some have countered the Arabian origins thesis by discussing the ways in which the Hijaz was not isolated from the surrounding world, arguing that the Quran was, by its very nature, a late antique document, full of references to the Old Testament and other influences from the *jahiliyya*. Like Islam itself, the Quran was, in this view, deeply related to the 'revealed' faiths of Christianity and Judaism and impossible to understand without recourse to its Abrahamic precursors.¹⁹

Situating the Quran within the cultural landscapes of Christianity, Judaism, and the influences of the *jahiliyya* does not necessarily mean that it is simply a derivative of those stimuli. Emphasising its late antique context, instead,

sets the Quran on an equal footing with the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament... [seeing it] as a highly original work that engages the figures, stories, and concepts of the biblical tradition—and other Near Eastern traditions—and responds to them in a dynamic, complex fashion.²⁰

This research area is, as one might imagine, rife with controversy, disagreements, and counter-argument. Some positions might seem extreme: for example, there is a group of scholars that advocates the viewpoint that if the emergence of Islam should be located within the late antique world, then it must be moved out of Arabia entirely, to place its birth closer to the deep-seated monotheistic traditions further north. Others wonder if Muhammad even existed as a person at all.²¹ Other issues of contention concern the roles of Mecca, a place that 'lay on the very edge of the field of vision of outside observers', and of Quraysh, the tribe from which the Prophet hailed.²²

The question of the sources and their reliability for central issues, such as establishing a biography of the Prophet or understanding how the Quran was compiled, is also an issue of

constant debate.²³ As noted in Chapter 1, al-Azmeh has tried to resolve this problem by bringing the Arab-Islamic tradition more fully into the conversation, while Hoyland has taken a broad approach in his work *In God's Path*, by using the most contemporary sources available, no matter their confessional provenance.²⁴ Taking a different tack, Garth Fowden has recently proposed an entirely new periodisation for late antiquity, in order to examine Christianity and Islam 'comparatively but not ahistorically'—in other words, to see Islam as a phenomenon that 'grew out of [late antiquity] and even developed some of its major preoccupations'.²⁵ In the 'sectarian milieu'²⁶ of late antiquity (a phrase that refers to the development of religious communities circumscribed by persecution, imperial support, martyrdom, violence, and theological differences), the advent of a new community of believers that engaged in dialogue and violence with other groups and shared many of their concerns was not, perhaps, an entirely unsurprising development.²⁷ Fowden points out that it took Islam until at least the tenth century to reach a level of maturity comparable to Christianity after the Council of Nicaea; reconceptualising the place of Islam within the broader concerns of late antique (or, to use Fowden's phrase, 'First Millennium') studies squarely situates the emergence and development of Islam within a much longer *longue durée* than that which has, thus far, seemed possible.²⁸

Within the debate over Islam's origins lies the question of how much the apocalyptic aspects of the Quran and what some see as the Prophet's militaristic creed, deeply invested in the idea of holy war, might be connected to the apocalyptic prosecution of the war between Heraclius and Khusrau II. This conflict did not pass unknown in Arabia, and it has been argued that Quranic commentators assigned Roman sympathies to one section of the early *umma*, while the Meccans, whose polytheistic beliefs were waning rapidly and many of whom were hostile to Muhammad, were believed to have inclined towards Khusrau II.²⁹ As Peter Sarris notes, 'militant monotheism and eschatological piety were Muhammad's core demands', and these qualities had been brought to the fore and mercilessly tested by the seventh-century Romano-Persian war. For the survivors of, and witnesses to, that conflict, the apocalypse may still have seemed a likely and imminent reality.³⁰ Indeed, Juan Cole situates the early Muslims within the Roman orbit and argues that catastrophic events such as the fall of Jerusalem had a significant impact on the Prophet's way of thinking, leading him to envision 'an alternative sort of society, one firmly grounded in practices of peace'.³¹ While suggesting that the apparent commonality of apocalyptic ideas between different communities was not so clear cut, Averil Cameron has argued that the emergence of Islam might better be understood as a 'reform movement' in the face of political and ecclesiastical divisions within the Romano-Persian world.³²

Key to any investigation of early Islam is the question of what sort of unification, if any, was underway in sixth-century Arabia. A new impetus for this has been provided by the discovery of the inscriptions at Hima, discussed in Chapters 3 and 4. In the opinion of the team that found them, they:

therefore reveal a powerful movement of cultural unification amongst the Arabs, from the Euphrates to Najran, which was manifested by the use of the same script, by the progressive abandonment of Aramaic in favour of Arabic in inscriptions, by the same method of dating, and by the same calendar. This march towards unification has already been suggested, earlier, by specialists in pre-Islamic poetry, by situating in the same period, in the Najd [central Arabia] the development of a common poetical language (*koiné*).³³

Some of the Hima texts are commemorative in nature, perhaps recording the passing of martyrs, and, as noted in Chapter 3, they might also reflect the growing rifts between the

Christian Arab and Himyarite communities in the 470s.³⁴ Philip Wood has suggested that Christianity in late antique Arabia might have been progressively ‘separated from Roman identity’, with the ability to ‘take on a highly egalitarian pan-ethnic self-identity’ connected with ideas of martyrdom.³⁵ The impetus behind an Arabian monotheistic religious community, capable of spanning the Peninsula but removed from the suffocating embrace of empire, might have originated in the Christian milieu of late antique Arabia whose identity is only now being slowly understood as inscriptions like those from Hima are discovered—even if the long-sought after evidence for a pre-Islamic Bible in Arabic continues to elude historians and archaeologists.

There was most likely a political impetus behind such a cultural development, and this might be identified in the semi-independence of the kings of Kinda, who, having long ago been plucked from South Arabia and placed in control of Maadd, then imagined a different future for themselves amongst the competing influences from Himyar, al-Hira, and the Roman empire. The idea of a succession of client kings moving beyond their initial briefs is instantly familiar to students of the late Roman west, whose Germanic warlords translated their positions, over time, into kingdoms of their own, taking advantage of periods of imperial weakness. The relationship between Maadd and al-Hira—which may have involved an interregnum at al-Hira, certainly involved Hiran clientship over Maadd, and most definitely required repeated Himyarite intervention—reflects the repeated attempts by outsiders to control this crucial central Arabian milieu. Justinian clearly felt that it was necessary to influence this region as well, and Great Power competition can be deduced as the most likely driving force behind the rather opaque political developments that were probably underway. The nature of the relationship between Roman authorities and the kings of Kinda after the death of Justinian is not clear, but the turmoil in Himyar after Abraha’s death may have provided an opportunity for Kinda and Maadd to be firmly spun out of Himyar’s orbit, while the collapse of the super-phyllarchates shortly afterwards removed an important layer of imperial influence in North and central Arabia. It is also unclear how much the Persian conquest of the Roman east affected groups like Kinda and Maadd, but it can be imagined that, shorn of much of its earlier colonial interference as the sixth century wore on, late antique North and central Arabia was a region ripe with political possibility by the dawn of the new century. As a possible reaction against the backdrop of Great Power competition, we are reminded of Patricia Crone’s theory that the emergence of Islam was a sort of ‘nativist’ response to external pressures, and may, as Fred Donner suggests, have been related to the ‘virtual encirclement of Arabia’ completed under the Sasanians by the second decade of the seventh century.³⁶

Was there such a thing as ‘Arab identity’ in late antiquity?

Implicit in any enquiry into cultural unity is the related question of ethnic and/or political identity. The question of whether or not there was an Arab identity before Islam—in the sense of what ‘it meant’ to be an Arab—has been hotly debated for years and was briefly touched on in Chapter 3 in the discussion of the inscription of Mara al-Qays (al-Namara). Most recently, Peter Webb has advanced a highly sceptical position in his argument that ‘the evidence from pre-Islamic Arabia frustrates the search for pre-Islamic Arab communal consciousness’, and that ‘in the pre-Islamic era... ‘Arab’ was a label without a people, it was the property of outsiders who used the word without close consideration of the actual status of Arabian communities’.³⁷ Few people who read the maddeningly bald texts of ancient historians (at least in so far as they address ‘Arabs’) would disagree, and certainly, the late

Irfan Shahid's wide-ranging efforts to try and delineate a kind of pre-Islamic identity ultimately proved unconvincing, precisely because of the sorts of evidential problems that Webb discusses.

Applying the theories of ethnogenesis (those theories that examine the creation of an *ethnos*, or people), hitherto the analytical purview of scholarship covering the late Roman Germanic west, to the Islamic period, Webb has argued that there was a 'comprehensive construction of Arabness' only then, and not earlier. Indeed, in the pre-Islamic period, Webb argues, to 'be' an Arab meant little since there were so few explicit mentions of the name 'Arab' referring to any sort of community or group.³⁸ Webb further suggests that 'a history of the Arabs should in any event be most interested in the period when Arabs began to construct history into their own communal story', a notion that, to some extent, removes any sense of agency or purpose to Arabs in the pre-Islamic period. This position is strengthened by downplaying the utility of 'outsider' texts, which, as we have seen, dominate the pre-Islamic sources.³⁹

In general, Webb's argument that there was no *pan-Arab* consciousness in the pre-Islamic period, together with his idea of an 'Arabless Arabia', are persuasive in so far as these theories call attention to the political, religious, and cultural diversity of different communities living in the Peninsula and the fringes of Syria, the province of Arabia, and Iraq.⁴⁰ Certainly, as we have seen in Chapter 2, Graeco-Roman authors were remarkably imprecise in the use of the word 'Arab' and their ability to locate areas where they believed 'Arabs' actually lived. However, as Hoyland notes, it is not necessary to eliminate any sense of community (-ies) in the pre-Islamic Arab world in order to prove that a *different* sort of community emerged later on.⁴¹ Furthermore, calling the inhabitants of pre-seventh century Arabia 'pre-Islamic Arabs' does not necessarily invoke the kind of stereotypes that populate the first part of Webb's text; it is possible to speak of Italians in Republican Italy in a general sense, the inhabitants of the polyglot Persian empire as 'Persians', or the multifarious inhabitants of Roman Britain as 'Britons'. If we decide not to call Arabs of the pre-Islamic period 'pre-Islamic Arabs', the result is an ever-dwindling minimalist cul-de-sac which logically ends in our denial of their very existence, and contributes to another sort of stereotypical misunderstanding—that the Arabs emerged as (any kind of) community only after the rise of Islam.⁴² In other words, it is not necessary to deny any people a community or form of communal identity, whether small or large, in order to make an argument for a later ethnogenesis. Or, as al-Azmeh puts it:

Anglo-Saxon and more specifically British scholarship seems generally to have a problem with employing the name 'Arabs', with reluctance, of varying intensity, to use the name at all, and with myriad caveats, inverted commas and evasive locutions even when such a nomination is manifestly apt. While it is advisable to eschew anachronism, primordialism and perennialism, the fact remains that the late antique Arabs, for all their multiple contemporary designations, came from the third century AD to leave a clear and distinct epigraphic record... in addition to language, alliance, and territorial networks.⁴³

Webb also denies the vast corpus of pre-Islamic poetry any agency in wielding a form of identity, a contention which seems unlikely on the basis of the evidence and which is contested by al-Azmeh and also by Hoyland, who, among others, has linked the emergence of the oral poetry corpus to the power of the sixth-century super-phylarchs.⁴⁴ The creation of an artistic culture is a tremendously important force in identity formation, and studies of pre-Islamic poetry (together with the prose stories of heroic deeds known as the *ayyam al-arab*) reveal the deliberate creation of an oral poetic culture in the pre-Islamic period.⁴⁵ Furthermore, like

other long-held convictions, Webb's argument that 'pre-Islamic 'Old Arabic' speakers' could only have been 'a tiny minority', and his assertion that the concentration of Old Arabic texts in the north suggests that Arabic was not used across the Peninsula, have been upended by the recent discoveries at Hima. These texts have added to the corpus of inscriptions written in Arabic and predominantly within a Christian milieu, and this group, sharing so many similarities but so far apart from one another, reflects the existence of Arabic-speaking Christians who chose to record their devotions in an early form of the Arabic script. Denying the status of 'community' for this population, which could boast links between a common language, common faith, and common calendar, seems a little premature.⁴⁶ Furthermore, as Ahmad al-Jallad has shown, Arabic was widely used in Greek transcription and examples are known from a variety of sources, most famously the Petra Papyri. The study of 'Graeco-Arabica' is of particular value as it provides some way towards understanding how Old Arabic was spoken in the pre-Islamic period, particularly with regard to its likely pronunciation.⁴⁷

The afterlife of the super-phylarchates

As noted in Chapter 3, the kings of al-Hira and the city itself had a remarkable afterlife in the Arab-Islamic tradition, leaving a legacy that was both 'cultural and ceremonial'.⁴⁸ Al-Hira's faded glories, and the forgotten majesty of its once-powerful ruling family, continued to fascinate contemporaries; in one story from Yaqut's *Mujam al-buldan*, Hind the Younger, offered an aristocratic Muslim husband by the great Muslim general Khalid b. Walid if only she would convert, rejects his overtures and decides instead to remain 'in the monastery she herself had built, tending her family's worn-out bones until she goes to join them'.⁴⁹

Meanwhile, other Abbasid-era sources took great interest in Jabala b. al-Ayham al-Ghasani, whom they portrayed as the last great (Roman) Arab king. According to the legends that grew up around him, Jabala took part in the pivotal battle at Yarmuk (636), which marked the decisive defeat of the army of Heraclius in Syria. Nothing is known from contemporary sources of Jabala, although some years ago Shahid published an intriguing seal from the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, dated to the end of the sixth or early seventh century. Christian crosses sit next to the Greek legend 'Gabala, *patrikios*', and mystery has swirled around this figure ever since.⁵⁰

Julia Bray, who has collected the various notices of Jabala b. al-Ayham in Islamic texts, has noted that in some of these accounts Jabala represents less an individual than 'the archetype' of a lost age—'of *jahiliyya*, Christianity, and kingship', a representation of the passing of the ages to a new and more modern era.⁵¹ This sort of *ubi sunt* ('where are they now?') figure, seized upon to show a romanticised vision of a lost past, is of course similar to the antiquarian images of al-Hira found in the Arab-Islamic tradition. Elsewhere in the 'Jabala corpus' the king's character gains greater complexity, and the stories feature historical figures such as the caliph Umar and the future caliph Muawiya. In many of the stories Jabala converts to Islam, but later becomes an apostate, fleeing to Heraclius. Variations include Jabala, a new convert, travelling with his court to Medina, setting off with Umar on an abortive pilgrimage that ends in Jabala causing an uproar by breaking a man's nose; later, after threatening to recant his conversion, he flees by night to Heraclius. In other places Jabala is a staunch defender of Roman Christian lands, rejecting attempts by the invaders to parlay, and pledging to wear black until he has achieved his goal (and by implication the goal of Heraclius) in driving the aggressors back to the deserts of Arabia. In many of the stories, Jabala, who is often portrayed as a 'giant' (i.e., a large and imposing man), ends up in Roman territory with his followers—fulfilling 'the final destiny of Ghassan, in a poetic

sense'⁵²—and these tales have led some to assume that the super-phyllarchate survived either in exile or in a new form. Shahid, for example, suggested that the reference to the 'Saracens who are subject to our Christ-loving state' in the victory bulletin of Heraclius—preserved in the *Chronicon Paschale* and delivered in the wake of the triumph over Khusrau II—was a reference to the Jafnids/Ghassanids, who had returned to Syria from self-imposed exile in Anatolia. Following the conquests of the *muhajirun*, some, including Jabala, Shahid argues, then chose to 'emigrate finally' from Syria, and live out their twilight in Roman territory.⁵³ Some traditions even ascribe 'Ghassanid' ancestry to the Byzantine emperor Nicephorus I (802–11), via Jabala.⁵⁴ A semi-mythical figure, Jabala could be used to test the purity of the new faith, celebrate the greatness of the empire that the *muhajirun* supplanted, and serve all kinds of other useful literary and rhetorical purposes.

Other views of the family of al-Harith are widely found in the Arab-Islamic tradition. Hamza al-Isfahani, for example, chronicled the royal lineage and ascribed to them a wide variety of building projects, very few of which have been confirmed by modern archaeological, historical, or epigraphic studies.⁵⁵ In the famous *Kitab al-Aghani* (the 'Book of Songs') of Abu al-Faraj al-Isfahani, the court of the Roman Arabs was a decadent place where precious gifts were the norm, singing girls came from far and wide to perform, and wine was freely drunk.⁵⁶ The Roman Arabs and the Hiran kings were also celebrated in the *qasidas* of pre-Islamic Arabia, collected and organised during the eighth and ninth centuries into an edition known as the *Mufaddaliyyat* (after its compiler, the eighth-century al-Mufaddal al-Dabbi), and its more famous cousin, the *Muallaqat*. This was originally a collection of seven poems chosen by Hammad al-Rawiya ('the transmitter'); the poems proved wildly popular, and it was not long before rival versions of the *Muallaqat* emerged.⁵⁷ In one famous poem from the *Mufaddaliyyat* by al-Akhnas, the different tribes of pre-Islamic Arabia are enumerated, with Lakhm and Ghassan singled out for their authority, wealth, and military prowess.⁵⁸ One particularly famous poet, Hassan b. Thabit (who features prominently in the 'Jabala corpus') wrote eloquently of the 'house of Jafna' and may have been close to leading figures amongst the Roman Arabs. A well-known poem by Hassan, featuring the family of Jafna and the places associated with them, is sometimes thought to contain references to the Justinianic Plague.⁵⁹

Despite the afterlife of the Al Jafna (the family of Jafna, i.e., the descendants of Jabala, al-Harith, and al-Mundhir) in later sources, we may ask precisely what result the removal of the super-phyllarchs had in terms of the conquests themselves. It has been argued that members of Ghassan played a pivotal role in the *hijra* of Muhammad from Mecca to Medina in 622, on behalf of the emperor Heraclius, who had launched his counteroffensive against Khusrau II in that year. By using their influence in Yathrib (Medina—previously under the influence of Abraha, Chapter 4), members of Ghassan were able to encourage Khazraj, one of the dominant tribes of Yathrib, to accept Muhammad and his burgeoning community to the disadvantage of the Jews of upper Yathrib. The benefit for Heraclius was a quiet flank in Arabia and the political neutralisation of Yathrib's large Jewish community, which, given what had recently transpired during the capture of Jerusalem (Chapter 4), may have had little incentive to support the Romans and may have threatened to be a problematic fifth column.⁶⁰ The resulting period of protection at Yathrib allowed Muhammad to consolidate his control, and eventually he was able to defeat his Meccan rivals. There is no hint of Roman-sponsored intervention in the *hijra* in contemporary Roman sources, but, as noted at the end of Chapter 4, there are numerous records of Arabs fighting alongside Roman forces in the war with Persia, so it is clear that Arab individuals remained in Roman service. There is no particular reason to doubt that Arabs skilled at mediation could have performed the delicate

negotiations required to convince the representatives of Khazraj to accept Muhammad, but, like so much here, we shall never know the exact truth.

From another standpoint, the remnants of the phylarchal system—visible in the scattered mentions of Arab allies in the Romano-Persian war and the later stories of their involvement in attempting to repel the *muhajirun* in Syria—may have been quite unable to play any sort of meaningful role in the conquests at all. The rationale for this has to do with the dependency of Arab allies on their imperial patrons, which finds a useful foil in the late antique Roman west, where the ‘immediate first tier’ of Germanic *foederati* was the first to go when Roman authority collapsed. These ‘cooked’ barbarians (in Hoyland’s phrase, borrowed from Chinese terminology) thus gave way to ‘barbarians who were less cooked and some who were downright raw’.⁶¹ In the same way that the Franks, in the ‘second tier’, benefitted from the fatal, very high level of dependence on Rome by the ‘first tier’ Alamanni, so in the Middle East the ‘second tier’ of ‘half-cooked barbarians’, those one or two steps removed from imperial reliance, were the ones best positioned to profit from the disappearance of the super-phylarchs and the vacuum left in the aftermath of the Romano-Persian war.⁶² Arab raiding into the province of Arabia and Syria had already begun by 610, and, by 614, Arab incursions were making life miserable for monks in the deserts not far from Jerusalem.⁶³ As Roman territory fell to the Persians and Arab raids probed the southern limits of the Roman provinces, Muhammad completed the *hijra* and later, after squaring the differences between the Meccans and Medinans, the first concerted attacks into the Roman empire began in 630, providing the shortest of pauses for the Romans after Heraclius had returned the True Cross to Jerusalem (Chapter 4).

As we have seen throughout, Romano-Persian influences penetrated deep into Arabia and the ‘second tier’, like the Franks in the west, was not completely isolated from imperial culture. On the other hand, a key advantage that the ‘second tier’ may have had was a certain distance from the class-conscious world of the late antique Middle East, into which men like al-Mundhir had been tightly bound. A key appeal of universal monotheism is its promise of egalitarianism: an emperor and a desert hermit could both be equal before God. Yet Christian classlessness was all but impossible in the status-ridden aristocratic world of the late Roman empire, and Islam’s egalitarian appeal may have offered a more promising alternative. The very closeness of Arab phylarchs to their imperial sponsors, which had been the source of so much of their stature and authority, might explain how other Arab groups with a less complicated historical connection to the stratified world of the Fertile Crescent supplanted the Arabs who had been so prominent in sixth-century sources.⁶⁴ Like some Germanic warlords who became ‘too Roman’ for their own, even if al-Mundhir and those like him were able to appeal to a tribal audience (see below), they may also have been ‘too Roman’ to play much of a role in the creation of the *umma*. Perhaps then Shahid was right when he suggested that the remnants of the family of al-Harith retired to safety in Anatolia, preserving their status as *patrikioi* of the empire, marooned far from a lost world which had no further use for them.

Heritage destruction

Another way to measure the legacy of the period covered by this book is by assessing one of the terrible side effects of the wars that have engulfed Syria and Iraq: the effacement of ancient religious communities and the destruction of built and intangible cultural heritage, a collective attempt to erase evidence of a multi-ethnic, polyglot, and pluralist past. The obliteration of built heritage, such as mosques and churches, together with the destruction of statues, the burning of books, and the looting of museums, has been overshadowed by

the deaths of so many. Yet the destruction of culture is, in and of itself, a war crime. Such ‘cultural terrorism’ is designed to promote the beliefs and values of one community at the expense of others, as has been the case with ISIS in Iraq and Syria.⁶⁵ The insidious black market trade in antiquities has proven to be not only another way to destroy a community’s culture, but has also enriched the perpetrators and allowed them to continue their criminal acts.⁶⁶ Illegal digging at Dura Europos in Syria, for example—the excavation of which in the 1930s led to the breathtaking discovery of the Dura Synagogue, fortunately preserved in the National Museum in Damascus—has resulted in extensive looting that spread even to the sacking of the visitors’ centre at the site.⁶⁷ Before and after satellite photographs reveal a density of looters’ pits so concentrated that counting them has proven impossible.⁶⁸ As we have seen, several places discussed in this book, such as Hatra, have also been damaged; even the remains of the column where Symeon the Stylite is reputed to have spent so much of his career, together with the shrine surrounding it, were heavily damaged in a Russian airstrike in 2016.⁶⁹ Rusafa, too, home of the shrine to St Sergius, has been damaged.⁷⁰ Sites sacred to the memory of early Islam have not been spared; in Homs, the beautiful mosque of Khalid b. Walid has been virtually gutted in fighting for the beleaguered city.

While much of the damage has been ‘collateral’, an unintended result of fighting, the very deliberate and savage assault on the ancient communities of Syria and Iraq has been laid bare, above all, by ISIS’ own propaganda. As noted in Chapter 2, ISIS’ ‘cultural cleansing’ serves its purpose of instituting what it believes to be a purist form of Islam unadulterated by the passage of time, eradicating peoples it labels as heretics and denying survivors their culture. A large proportion of the attacks have therefore been on sites and communities with roots in the pre-Islamic world, and have been carried out with brazen, attention-seeking audacity; prior to taking Mosul, ISIS even published a list of structures located in the Nineveh governorate that it intended to destroy.⁷¹ At a conference in 2014, the co-director of the Syrian Heritage Initiative of the American Schools of Oriental Research, Michael Danti, underscored the sectarian nature of such acts, revealing, for example, that 54% of sites that ISIS had destroyed were Shia.⁷² Indeed, while acts such as the demolition of the Temple of Bel at Palmyra grabbed the headlines, it is the more prosaic structures integral to the rhythms of daily life, such as churches, mosques, schools, mausolea, shrines, museums, and other public buildings of significance to the community, that have been effaced from the landscape. Such acts cause irreparable damage to a person’s identity, shattering the sense of belonging and place that grounded and provided cultural ownership for the ancient Christian, Jewish, Shia, Sunni, and Yazidi communities, to name simply the most prominent groups whose lives have been overturned in the chaos.

It is also clear that ISIS’ claim to be restoring a pure and idealised world of seventh-century Arabia is historically and theologically misplaced.⁷³ As we have seen throughout this book, Arabia at the turn of the seventh century boasted a multi-ethnic and multi-religious landscape that hosted a plethora of communities with ancient claims of belonging. Many of the places and communities attacked by ISIS in recent years were left alone and even revered by the ancient *umma* as it took control of the Middle East. The recent military defeat of ISIS in Syria will not be the end of groups that attack the heritage of others in order to advance their own agenda, and the losses to cultural heritage in Syria and Iraq, as well as in Yemen, are of depressing relevance to a modern world riven by division. Those who survived ISIS’ occupation of Mosul, for example, have lost ‘nearly all of the architectural landmarks that formed a unique panorama of the city’, including the near-total destruction of an entire medieval architectural style that was a fusion of Christian and Shia forms, ‘unique in the Islamic world’.⁷⁴ Despite the fact that cultural terrorism is prosecutable under international law, and,

following the precedent set by the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, can be seen to constitute a crime against humanity, to date there have been very few convictions worldwide. Similarly, while UNESCO has consented to include heritage protection in UN peacekeeper training, there has been a deafening lack of international coordinated action to safeguard cultural heritage, leaving third parties and individual states to take action on their own initiative.⁷⁵

Assessing late antique Arab leadership

I would like to turn now to what I consider a rather interesting and productive way to assess the legacy of the ideas and period covered in this book.⁷⁶ The stunning successes of the Arab armies over Rome and Persia in the seventh century, and the astonishing spread of Islam east and west and the establishment of the caliphate, together with the careers of the caliphs themselves, have all traditionally overshadowed the careers of men like al-Mundhir and al-Numan. As imperial subordinates, it is tempting to view their exploits as an historical phenomenon wholly directed by state policies, and to see their otherwise interesting lives and deeds as an unassuming coda to simply another violent century in world history. After all, their aspirations did not survive the fratricidal whims of their political masters, and their rapid disappearance from our sources only underscores their fleeting significance. On the other hand, they cannot be ignored, because it was in this period, *before* the emergence of Islam and contemporary to the birth of the Prophet, that strong Arab leadership developed. Arab leaders like al-Mundhir and al-Numan were not simply footnotes in the history of the Middle East; rather, they provide a conduit that links the pre-Islamic period to the age of their distant half-cousins, the early Muslim caliphs. These men, viceroys of Allah, would preside over the next Great Power to shape, and rule, the Middle East.

The nature and character of Arab tribal leadership

To be a chief within a village seemed... a thankless task... The chief intervened to mediate quarrels between [tribal members] but they were under no obligation to listen to him. Chiefs and elders deliberated on what course a village should pursue, but no-one was obliged to obey them. Chiefs were men with large responsibilities and few resources. But chiefs were also widely acknowledged as men of influence; they were not the same as other men.⁷⁷

Throughout this book, we have been largely dependent on what outsiders had to say about Arab leaders and Arab communities. In the modern world, a researcher might try to balance this discrepancy in the sources of information by conducting interviews, transcribing local or oral histories, or carrying out anthropological studies, in order to gain a different, 'insider' insight. Such courses of action are, of course, quite impossible in the context of a time so far removed from our own, and those who had the opportunity to do so, to find out more first-hand information about late antique Arabs—Menander, Ammianus, or Procopius, for example—either chose not to, or, if they did, their work has not survived. This leaves few options, but in recent years modern anthropological studies of tribal societies and tribal leadership have proven quite useful in making sense of ancient sources.⁷⁸ In particular, a comparative approach restores agency to Arab leaders in situations which might otherwise suggest that such individuals were simply passive recipients of imperial policies, support, or punishment. This is a particularly potent tool for the historian, because state/tribe tensions lie at the heart

of the careers of men like al-Mundhir, whose elite status was itself very much a creation of the state.⁷⁹ It was, after all, state authorities that initially identified promising individuals to whom they could devolve power and authority. In this respect it is unsurprising that outsider sources reflect the view that men like al-Harith and al-Mundhir were mere loyal servants of the crown, whose punishment was merited when they stepped out of line.

The state's creation of tribal elites may have led to an equally misleading picture at the other end of the spectrum, the sort of 'manicured' images of tribal leadership mentioned in Chapter 1. The self-presentation of Arab leaders reflects 'an instance of quasi-royalist social differentiation' which was also a result of imperial policy.⁸⁰ To put it another way, one might imagine 'king' al-Mundhir holding court at Rusafa to impress visiting dignitaries along the lines of the following account, taken from William Lancaster's study of the Rwala Bedouin of Jordan:

In the dealings between sheikhs and outsiders impression-management comes into play... The impression they intend to convey is one of power and magnificence. My earliest contacts with the Rwala sheikhs were at feasts given for visiting officials and the scene was of almost nineteenth-century splendour—slaves and servants abounded and there was a continual stream of fruit, sweetmeats, kebabs and drinks... the guests needed to do nothing for themselves. All these services were performed by slaves and servants at a sign from the sheikh... One would have said that they went in fear of their lives if they disobeyed or were even careless. As soon as the visitors had left, it became apparent that the whole scene was a charade designed solely to impress. The slaves lolled in the recently vacated seats, the sheikhs poured their own tea, the servants ate up the titbits, or simply left... How far anyone is taken in by these phoney displays of omnipotence is hard to say.⁸¹

In the same vein, it is impossible to say how much the various inscriptions from Christian sites represent sincere Christian devotion on the part of al-Harith and his son. Was their support of the cult of St Sergius genuine, merely pragmatic, or a mix of the two? Control of cult sites bestowed status and 'nobility', so there was a clear political advantage to doing so.⁸²

As suggested in Chapter 1, the most realistic portrait of Arab leadership in late antiquity probably lies somewhere between the twin poles of outsider sources and the deliberate forms of self-presentation by the few insider sources produced by the Arab leaders themselves. It is in this conceptual gap, then, that anthropological studies come into their own in helping us to establish a sensible and credible picture. A useful starting point is to outline the main characteristics of successful tribal leadership, briefly touched on in Chapter 1.

Reputation and prestige were key in societies that have normally been characterised as more egalitarian than hierarchical, and where the authority of the leader was counterbalanced by other power blocs within the tribe.⁸³ Such societies did not possess the sort of hierarchies usually associated with states, which included civil and military hierarchies and social castes represented, for example, by the *illustres*. Tribal consent, or public opinion, was what kept tribal leaders in their posts.⁸⁴ Such consent was granted to prestigious individuals who attained their standing through actions that benefitted the tribe. These included, for example, a proven ability at face-to-face mediation and problem-solving;⁸⁵ the ability to provide moral leadership, through offering counsel, hospitality, and acts of benefaction;⁸⁶ and by maintaining the integrity of the tribe, usually by protecting its interests. Amongst the tribe itself membership of the group was the main source of protection, and so a leader's abilities were of great importance.⁸⁷ (It is not a coincidence that pre-Islamic Arabic oral literature is full of references to

military virtue, a key way to win and maintain prestige *inter pares*).⁸⁸ A privileged access to commodities or resources, including information, was also key; as Lancaster noted of the Rwala, ‘in a political system of this sort, where the ‘leader’ has no coercive powers at all, his best means of justifying and maintaining his position is by being better informed than anyone else’.⁸⁹ When the self-styled caliph of ISIS, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, ‘unveiled’ the caliphate in Mosul in July 2014, his accession speech—cribbed from that given by the successor to Muhammad and first caliph, Abu Bakr (d. 634)—explicitly reflected the importance of tribal consent. Stating, ‘I have been appointed to rule over you, though I am not the best among you... if you see that I do right, help me, and if you see that I do wrong, set me right’, al-Baghdadi drew on centuries of precedence in describing the tenuous nature of his position.⁹⁰

When tribes encountered states, the opportunities to gain access to resources (including information) and to earn prestige and status multiplied, but the hierarchical nature of states such as the Roman empire threatened to disrupt ‘the moral premises through which bedouin organised economic and political activities’.⁹¹ In anthropological terms this could lead to social stratification or differentiation, the development of state-like hierarchies that narrowed the gap between the structures of state and tribe. Within the tribe, the elite strata existed, as our sources clearly show, but the distance between them and their peers was not as significant as it was within the imperial court.⁹² Nevertheless, the application of late antique social castes such as the *illustres* to a small number of tribal members would have represented a key challenge to the mechanisms of consent that formed the traditional basis of tribal leadership.

Mediation, acts of benefaction, protecting the tribe, preservation of status and prestige—examples of all of these different leadership traits, together with the pressures and support exerted and provided by the state, are found throughout this book, most clearly in the careers of the super-phylarchs in Chapter 4. Often such leadership characteristics overlapped. Mediation, for example, could be carried out on a regional level, including obtaining resources from the state, such as financial support, which might also benefit the tribe. State support through the office of phylarch, also earned through a sort of mediation, implied the highly valued commodity of state protection against one’s enemies. Mediation involved a *quid pro quo*, and the most important bargaining chip that any tribal leader in the ancient Middle East had to offer to overstretched imperial authorities was manpower. As Ernest Gellner has noted, such manpower was particularly valuable when it ‘arrived, fully trained... with recognized leaders and a familiarity with the terrain in which they were to be deployed’.⁹³ The idea expressed throughout the ancient sources that Arabs were valuable and agile warriors who could conduct lightning raids is a case in point. Mediation could also be carried out on a much broader level: through their positions as super-phylarchs, for example, sixth-century Arab leaders were ‘mediators between the late antique world and the Arabs of the Peninsula’, facilitating the movement of ideas, culture, religious beliefs, and trade; the hypothesis concerning the possible role of Ghassan in facilitating the *hijra* (above) provides an example of this.⁹⁴

One of the best examples of mediation involving a tribal leader is found in the story of Mavia’s revolt in 377 (Chapter 3). The bargaining chip that she had to play was tribal manpower, which was unleashed on the Romans as a form of leverage when Mavia’s demand for a Nicene bishop stalled in the Roman bureaucracy. Arab leaders could always hold this threat in check when they could not obtain what they wanted, or when they encountered unfavourable conditions at court; al-Mundhir’s withdrawal to the desert in the early 570s is another good example of how tribal resources could be leveraged in a dispute (Chapter 4). In Mavia’s case, once the bishop had been provided, the dispute was over, and there was no longer any need for mediation between the two parties or for Mavia to pressure the

Romans. Her rapid return to Roman service and the deployment of her troops to assist in the defence of Constantinople duly followed. The dramatic success of her military actions stood as a reminder of what could be expected if there were future disagreements (Sozomen, as noted in Chapter 3, said that in his time her deeds were still commemorated in song) but with the dispute resolved, cooperation superseded any profit that remained by continuing the conflict.⁹⁵

While Arab leaders could sometimes be found mediating issues that were civil or political in nature, such as Abu Karib's mediation recorded in the Petra Papyri, or the role of Abu Jafna in acting as a go-between for Maurice and Khusrau II, it is a reflection of the heavily politicised religious environment of the late antique east that examples of mediation and the giving of advice involving Arab leaders are overwhelmingly related to religious issues. Early stories of conversion illustrate a willingness to barter and negotiate: baptism and welcome into the Roman Christian *oikumene* required a concession of value on the part of leaders such as Zokomos, and this was, unsurprisingly, military manpower (Chapter 3). The careers of al-Harith and that of his son al-Mundhir are the most prominent examples of mediation linked with church matters, together with the role played by Jafna in addressing the recurring problems with Damian (Chapter 4). The survival of the various sources, skewed to those covering the careers of the Roman Arabs, means that the vast share of information concerning these kinds of mediation efforts relates to issues within the Roman empire. However, the way that the Persian Arab leader Alamoundaros demurred in the face of Joseph's messenger, bearing news about the massacre at Najran, can also be seen as a form of mediation, in so far as Alamoundaros was required to take into consideration the interests of two very different parties. (Interestingly, Isabel Toral-Niehoff has seen in this 'peculiar mixture of tolerance and control' a forerunner of the attitude taken by the Muslim caliphs towards non-Muslims in the Middle East).⁹⁶ Another, less well-known act of mediation by Alamoundaros is found in the *Chronicle of Seert*, in a section describing the arrival of Monophysites expelled from Roman lands during the reign of Justin I. Finding themselves amongst Dyophysites (Nestorians), the refugees underwent a theological debate chaired by Alamoundaros himself. The *Chronicle* reports that Justin wrote to Alamoundaros, asking him to remove the refugees from his territory. He agreed, but was not able to expel all of the Monophysites, some of whom remained at al-Hira. Others left and found themselves at Najran, where they ended up following Julianism (Chapter 3).⁹⁷

Allied to the skill of mediation were the abilities to advise and engage in acts of benefaction and patronage, accomplishments that could also be expected to bolster prestige and reputation. Our sources for the Persian Arabs are particularly forthcoming here, showing in detail the close relationship between al-Numan and Kavadh, and then Alamoundaros and Kavadh, in providing *personal* advice to the king on campaign. The king gained sound counsel, while the leader's status was inflated by his privileged access to royalty. While the relationship between al-Mundhir and Justin II and Maurice was clearly difficult, that between al-Mundhir and Tiberius II (until the end of his reign), as well as between al-Harith and Justinian, seems to have been much closer.

Public acts of benefaction among the late antique elite were common, and it is not always clear whether Arab leaders engaging in such activities were merely following common convention, or were doing so in order to earn and maintain prestige within their own peer groups. On the other hand, it is likely that one particular act of benefaction—plundering and re-distribution—was intended to benefit the tribe and support the chief's reputation. Plunder was earned on the battlefield as part of the various Romano-Persian conflicts, or the increasingly independent inter-group conflicts between Roman- and Persian-allied Arabs, and while there

are only a few direct references to its redistribution it is reasonable to assume that it was not always retained for personal use by Arab phylarchs. John of Ephesus, for example, records that after al-Mundhir's raids into the Persian empire in 581 against Qabus, funds were distributed to the impoverished and to the Monophysite monasteries. Madawi al-Rasheed has termed such benefactions as the conversion of 'wealth into a reputation for generosity', acts that bolstered the positions of individuals and also maintained a connection with the tribal peer group, a link that was always in danger of being lost as Arab phylarchs developed ever closer ties with their imperial patrons and their elaborate social structures.⁹⁸

The most visible form of benefaction by Arabs in our sources is provided by the numerous inscriptions discovered on public buildings, which are, to date, mostly Christian structures. These texts include those found at sites discussed in Chapter 4, such as the churches dedicated to St Sergius at Nitl and Tall al-Umayri East, the monastery at Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharbi, the martyrion at al-Burj, and the al-Mundhir building at Rusafa. (It is less clear whether the inscription at Samma calling for the protection of Abu Karib can be connected with an act of benefaction, or is simply a record, created by the local population, of someone held in high esteem). For the Persian Arabs, the *Chronicle of Seert* reported that al-Numan's son, Hasan, worked for the betterment of the poor, and the two monasteries at al-Hira of Hind the Elder and Hind the Younger prominently connected the leading family to the commissioning of public buildings. The burial of the *catholicos* Ishoyabh in the monastery of Hind the Younger also connected the family to the most senior consecrated figure in the Church of the East. In many ways, therefore, the activities of the Persian Arabs were not dissimilar to those of their Roman Arab rivals.

Pre-Islamic Christian inscriptions in Arabic

A remarkable feature of the late antique Middle East is that the involvement of Arabs with Christian buildings is not confined to the family of al-Harith or the kings of al-Hira. In Chapter 3 we saw evidence for martyrion inscriptions that *may* belong to Arabs; in the sixth century, there is unambiguous evidence for Arabs engaging in acts of benefaction apparently unconnected (in a familial sense) to the leading dynasty of the Roman Arabs, and which feature a new development: the deliberate use of the Arabic language, but this time written in a recognisably Arabic script. The graffito at Jabal Says (Chapter 4) is one of the three Arabic language/script examples from Syria, with two martyrion, one from Zabad from northern Syria (512) and one from Harran in southern Syria (c. 567/8) providing the other two.⁹⁹

While the Arabic language had been used to write the inscription from al-Namara (Chapter 3), this had been written in the Nabataean script, and the other extant examples of pre-Islamic Arabic inscriptions were written in a variety of scripts, depending on the region in which they were set down.¹⁰⁰ Scholars have long recognised what have been termed 'transitional' texts, those written in a script that was at a transitional point between the Arabic script and the Nabataean Aramaic script from which Arabic developed. Numerous texts of this sort have been found in the southern limits of the former territory of the province of Arabia, in the northwest of modern Saudi Arabia.¹⁰¹

For a long time, it was thought that the only pre-Islamic inscriptions in a recognisably Arabic script were the three from Syria, mentioned above. The geographical distance between the transitional texts in Saudi Arabia and those in Syria was, therefore, not vast. However, the new discoveries at Hima now provide clear evidence that inscriptions written in a script similar to that used on the inscriptions from Zabad, Jabal Says, and Harran were being produced in South Arabia. These discoveries therefore require that the long-held belief that the

development of the Arabic script was a phenomenon that could be localised within the territory of the Roman province of Arabia and nearby Syria be revisited.¹⁰² Christian Robin has argued that it is unlikely that the Hima texts were directly influenced from the province of Arabia, and it was more probable that these Paleo-Arabic¹⁰³ texts came to be written at Hima via the intercession of an intermediary agent or phenomenon, such as the kings of Kinda or the long-standing links between Najran and al-Hira.¹⁰⁴

The Christian texts from Hima are remarkable not only for their use of Paleo-Arabic, but also for the fact that none of the names in the corpus are identifiably Himyarite, and several are evidently Old Testament-derived names such as Isaac or Moses. Only one of these texts is dated, to 364, reflecting the provincial era of Arabia, which gives a date of 469/70.¹⁰⁵ The texts themselves are not casual graffiti, or inscriptions left by travellers on their journeys between Himyar and the north, of which there are many examples scattered around the various important geographical features that lay astride the main routes of communication between South Arabia and the Fertile Crescent. Rather, these texts reflect the existence of a Christian community in a particular place at a specific time. This group reinforced its confessional choice with prominent Christian decorations, such as large and ornate crosses, carved adjacent to their inscriptions.¹⁰⁶

While the inscriptions from Hima are commemorative in nature, those from Zabad and Harran record acts of Christian benefaction carried out by Arabic-speaking individuals in the Roman empire. The martyrion from Zabad, dated to 512, is dedicated to St Sergius and is yet another confirmation of the relevance of this cult to Arab populations. The text is made up of three components, one each in Greek, Syriac, and Arabic:

*Greek text:*¹⁰⁷

In the year 823¹⁰⁸ on the 24th day of month Gorpaios¹⁰⁹ the *martyrion* of Saint Sergius was built from the foundations in the time of the *periodeutes* [itinerant clergy] John and of Anneos, son of Bo{r}keos, and Sergius son of Sergius son of Sergius.

Symeon, son of Amraas, son of Elias, and Leontius were the architects who built it. Amen. Saturninus Azizos. Azizos son of Sergius and Azizos Mara Barka gave (gifts).

Syriac text:

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and the Holy Spirit. In the year 823 of the month Illul the foundations were laid and John the *periodeutes*, may his memory be blessed, laid the first stone, and it was Mara who wrote (the inscription), and it was Annas and Antiochus who were the founders.

(in the margin) Abu Sergius.

*Arabic text:*¹¹⁰

May God be mindful of Sirgu son of Abd- Manafu and Ha{l/n}i son of Mara al-Qays and Sirgu son of Sadu and Syrwa and S{.}ygw

(Syriac, after the Arabic text)

Abu Sergius and Antiochus and Muqim bar Timay and Mari rebuilt it.

What is astonishing about the Zabad text is the difference between its three components. The Arabic, Greek, and Syriac texts are not simply translations of one another, but instead point to the complementary interests of different linguistic communities in constructing the martyrion. None of the individuals mentioned in the Arabic text are known from any other source, but it is significant that Arabic-speaking elites, who were presumably contributing funds to construct the building and to inscribe the dedication, and who were apparently *unconnected*

with any known leading Arab family, were engaging in one of the most visible acts of late antique community elites—the construction and upkeep of public buildings, and the commemoration of their involvement in these actions for God and for posterity. The actions of the individuals on the Zabad inscription present a natural continuation of the inscription of Mara al-Qays at al-Namara. Arab-speaking individuals in positions of authority were doing exactly what their Graeco-Roman and Nabataean neighbours had been doing for centuries—but this time, they were doing it using the Arabic language *and* the Arabic script (Figure 5.4).

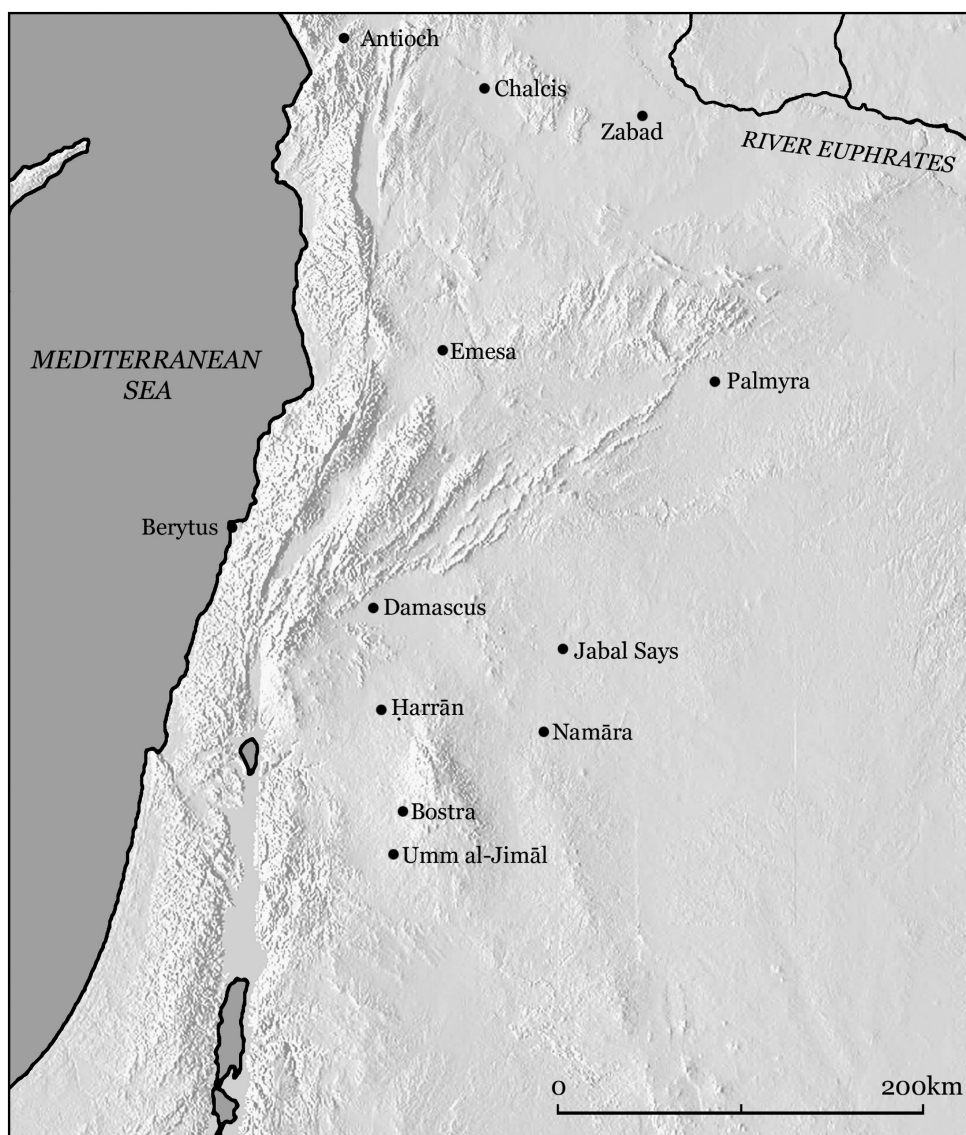


Figure 5.4 Map showing the locations of Zabad and Harran. Illustration by Mat Dalton and Carla Russo.

The text of Harran, from 568, is of even greater interest. This inscription features Greek and Arabic texts, which are, again, not simple translations of each other, but texts written to appeal to different points of interest in each community:

*Greek text*¹¹¹

Asaraël, son of Talemós, the phylarch founded this martyrion of St John in the first year of the indiction in year 463.¹¹² May the writer be remembered.

*Arabic text*¹¹³

1. I Sharahil son of Zalim built this *martyrion*
2. [in] the year 463, after the rebellion [?]
3. of Khaybar
4. by one year

The ‘rebellion of Khaybar’, not mentioned in the Greek text, was presumably included for its relevance to an Arabic-speaking audience. According to Ibn Qutayba, there was a raid by a certain al-Harith (perhaps al-Mundhir’s father, although he would have been very old) into northwestern Arabia, which resulted in the capture of various hostages. It is worth noting that Macdonald’s interpretation of the text favours instead a rebellion *of* Khaybar, or laying waste to the site, instead of an expedition, based on the specific form of the Arabic word in question.¹¹⁴ Nothing is known of this Asaraël/Sharahil, but again the text furnishes evidence for an Arabic-speaking elite engaging in an act of public benefaction.¹¹⁵ Could the prestige of al-Harith and his son, won in the service of Rome and through their ability to mediate, advise, and serve the interests of the tribe, have provided models for other ambitious individuals? It is very likely that Asaraël, identified here as a phylarch (although with no reference to a rank in the *illustres*) was one of those under the overall control of the super-phylarchate established by Justinian.

The question remains about whether Arab benefactors were simply adopting the behaviour of other late Roman elites—compare, for example, the argument advanced by Mark Whittow, discussed in Chapter 4, where al-Mundhir and his family were essentially considered competitors for resources by other Roman elites—or adapting more traditional roles of patronage to the world in which they functioned. It is not clear how this question should best be answered. However, acts of benefaction towards Christian sites benefitted religious communities in general, and the Christian sites that appear linked with Arabs in the epigraphic record, with the exception of Monophysite monasteries, like Qasr al-Hayr, spanned different communities. Chalcedonians, Monophysites, Roman emperors, and Persian kings patronised the cult of St Sergius, and so, more generally, attaining a position of high visibility in the built heritage of the late antique Christian east was a valuable way to earn political capital and prestige. Acts of Christian benefaction thus constituted a useful part of the tribal leader’s toolkit for building and maintaining a position.

Middlemen

Finally, we can consider two important and related attributes of tribal leaders. These are the ability to protect the manpower resource of the tribe, which was also for much of the time the source of internal legitimacy for the tribal leader, and the complementary function of tribal chiefs as middlemen, individuals who functioned as the link between state and tribe. Middlemen have been extensively examined by anthropologists and are found throughout history, such as in the office of *sugagu* at ancient Mari, middlemen appointed by the state

authorities to mediate with the tribal periphery,¹¹⁶ and in the North African *principes* discussed in Chapter 3. The development of middlemen as pivots between state and tribe was a direct result of the state's desire to access the resources of the tribe, and middlemen emerged in part as a defensive measure to safeguard the tribe's wellbeing.¹¹⁷ As phylarchs, Arab middlemen provided a manpower resource for the service of the state in exchange for a certain leeway of action, funding, titles, or other incentives. A recent example of the use of Arab middlemen is found in the Anbar Awakening in Iraq, where the Sunni tribal chiefs of Anbar negotiated with US forces for the use of their manpower and their moral influence to combat AQI, the forerunner of ISIS.¹¹⁸

The position of middleman could carry great advantages. As Frederick Barth has explained, a tribal middleman earned a position amongst 'the privileged urban elite' (such as the *illustres*) and was able to lobby for tribal interests at the urban centre of state power through a position that would have been impossible to reach under normal circumstances.¹¹⁹ Lois Beck has noted the reciprocal nature of middlemen, remarking that by cooperating with the state, tribal leaders won the ability to restrict the ways in which the state used the tribe's resources.¹²⁰ Reciprocation could also extend to exploitation, as tribal middlemen used their privileged access to the state's resources in order to reinforce their own position.¹²¹ This viewpoint is elaborated by Steven Caton, commenting on Beck's 1986 study of the Qashqai of southwest Iran. Caton remarked that the tribal elite, 'created by the state in order that it may rule a difficult and remote population more efficiently', was able through this very position to 'safeguard the interest of its constituents in the face of encroaching state power; and having been elevated to power by the state, elites could be its potential enemies'.¹²² The latter, of course, is exemplified by the revolt of Mavia and the deteriorating relationship between al-Mundhir and Roman authorities in the 570s.

Yet there were risks. Middlemen gave state authorities a window onto the tribe and its resources, however narrow. There was always the possibility that this window could be used to gain full control of the tribe, eliminate the chief, or otherwise undermine the relationship.¹²³ In addition, no matter how prestigious the middleman was to the tribe (or thought he was in his own mind), he could never realistically progress far beyond being what Philip Salzman has memorably called 'the reluctant bottom man'. This was 'the middleman's dilemma'.¹²⁴ Like a reluctant diplomat called on to carry out the unpopular decisions of an unloved government, a tribal middleman may not always have had much of a say in what an emperor or imperial agent asked of him. Furthermore, being the 'bottom man' meant that another 'bottom man' could easily be found if the current incumbent rocked the boat, no matter what Roman title he might hold. The unceremonious end of al-Mundhir in 581/2 is an excellent example of the expendability of tribal leaders. Successful tribal middlemen tended to be those who managed to balance the various competing forces, and one way to do this was to accede to the demands of different audiences. In our sources, this kind of balancing act is reflected by the range of titles that Arab leaders held. Al-Harith was *malik* to his people at Jabal Says, but *endoxotatos* and *patrikios* for a Roman audience. Hujr of Kinda was also *malik* to his people, but the official Himyarite term for his governorship was *hlfi* (the same term appears on the Murayghan 3 inscription, referring to Amr, the Hiran governor of Maadd, discussed in Chapter 4). Neither Roman nor Himyarite sources unambiguously acknowledge the 'royal' titles of any of these individuals.¹²⁵

The position of middleman, precarious though it was, did contain a silver lining: the middleman was, typically, the state's *sole* access to tribal manpower. Even though the Romans may have felt that they held the advantage after bestowing upon al-Mundhir the titles of *patrikios* and *paneuphemos*, granting him a crown, giving him gold, and so on, this all

counted for very little when disputes arose between the two parties in which al-Mundhir held the trump card. As we have seen in Chapter 4, al-Mundhir withdrew his military cooperation and ensured that his errant partner was punished for their wayward behaviour. This kind of reaction has been characterised as a strategy that alternated ‘between acceptance of indirect rule, military resistance, and avoidance’.¹²⁶ Mavia’s rebellion was, likewise, less of a revolt than a negotiating tactic. Seen from the viewpoint of the middleman, these two episodes appear to have quite a different character than that offered by the Roman sources. Both al-Mundhir and Mavia were clearly threatened by state policies, and they played their most important card—withdrawal of the one thing the state wanted most from them, their armies, whose potential for hostility *towards* the state was always implicit in the arrangement between the two parties.

Arabs, Germans, and state formation

Winning and maintaining prestige, acting as middlemen, mediating and problem solving, giving advice—these and the other characteristics of successful tribal leaders identified in modern anthropological studies find clear corollaries in the careers and experiences of Arab leaders discussed here. Viewing their careers through the lens of anthropological studies helps to show that there was a much higher level of agency amongst Arab leaders than our sources generally indicate. The predominantly outsider literary sources, in particular, are rather disinterested in Arab leaders unless their actions fall into the author’s area of interest, such as reports of battles, rebellions, ecclesiastical disputes, embassies, and so on. Only occasionally do we find a clear acknowledgement of tribal power, such as in Menander’s report of the treaty of 561/2, and this recognition is, by virtue of the technical language of the treaty copied by Menander, rather prosaic. Instead, by understanding rebellions as forms of negotiation, or by appreciating the importance of mediation for the maintenance of prestige and authority, we can see that Arab tribal leaders were very active participants in the late antique landscape, and that they achieved this role, in part, because of their relationship with the state.

Another group of non-Romans who fit this category are the Germans of late antique western Europe. Recently there have been some attempts to bring these two groups into closer dialogue; here I simply wish to draw attention to several points which, again, allow us to see the careers of the Arab phylarchs through a different lens, and to appreciate similarities and differences across the vast geographical area of the late Romano-Persian world.¹²⁷

Two particular Germanic leaders mentioned so far, Clovis, the Frankish king (Chapter 1) and Theoderic, king of the Ostrogoths in Italy (Chapter 3) are of great interest. Theoderic began his Roman career in 476 as *magister utriusque militiae praesentalis* (the first ‘barbarian’ to achieve this very senior position) and also took the rank of *patricius*.¹²⁸ In 484 he was named to the symbolic but still prestigious office of consul and took the name Flavius. All of this was a prelude to the emperor Zeno’s decision to send Theoderic west to deal with the usurper Odoacer, who had claimed the imperial throne in Italy. A chronicle of the time, the *Anonymous Valesianus*, records that Zeno also gave Theoderic money and, if he succeeded in defeating Odoacer, Theoderic was permitted to rule on Zeno’s behalf until such time as Zeno could make suitable arrangements.¹²⁹ Zeno had, then, created an elite tribal chief to do his bidding, and had given him a range of familiar tools to carry out his mission.

After he had removed Odoacer in 493, Theoderic made a show of sending the *ornamenta palatii*, the insignia of royal rank, to the new emperor in Constantinople, Anastasius, to underscore his loyalty. In the event, however, Anastasius returned the gesture and Theoderic

ruled Italy for over thirty years (493–526). Interestingly, the *Getica* of Jordanes claims that the Italian expedition was Theoderic's own idea, conceived in order to relieve the dissatisfaction of the Ostrogoths in Illyricum, who had nothing to do and were becoming restive. Theoderic, who had privileged access to information about what was going on Italy and a clear line of communication with Zeno, clearly saw the danger to his own position presented by the way he was whiling away the days in Constantinople.¹³⁰ It would be a good idea for Theoderic to remind the tribe that they needed him.

Aside from looking rather like a phylarch, at least at the beginning of his career, Theoderic, like any successful middleman, had two distinct sides to his kingship. A clear line can be drawn between the way he presented himself to Goths, on the one hand, and to the Italians, on the other. For the Goths he emphasised his warrior credentials, and his titles, rendered in Latin as *rex* or *dux*, recalled the use of these terms in ancient sources to characterise Germanic warrior chiefs. Cassiodorus' panegyric coverage of Theoderic's career cast him as a powerful warrior, and he earned the loyalty of his tribe through defending his people through acts of heroism on the battlefield and protecting them in times of danger.¹³¹ Other panegyrics written at the time emphasise the king's virility and martial strengths:

Mother, known to all peoples through your son's honour, you know that you have given birth to a man. Today is the day when the battlefield will prove the manhood of your son. With arms I must show that the fame of my ancestors does not come to an end with me. Without reason would we invoke the deeds of our ancestors if we had none of our own to show.¹³²

Theoderic had also been acclaimed as king by his Ostrogothic troops in a custom traditional amongst the Germanic *foederati* of late antiquity. It is clear that the consent of the tribe was key to his continued rule over the Ostrogothic part of the population in Italy.¹³³

For the Italians, Theoderic looked rather different. He doled out grain for the poor, an ancient Roman tradition with its roots deep in the 'bread and circuses' of the late Republic. While he was normally based in Ravenna, which had become a key forward location for Roman emperors in the wars of the late fourth and early fifth centuries, he carried out public works projects in Rome and celebrated his third decade of rule with a visit to the city. Roman elites including Cassiodorus, who continued to hold Roman positions in government (Cassiodorus himself was consul, *magister officiorum*, and then praetorian prefect of Italy) sometimes referred to Theoderic as *princeps*, the title taken by the emperor Augustus, and even *Augustus*, the common honorific title of the Roman emperor from the Principate onwards.¹³⁴ On a famous Latin inscription Theoderic is known as the 'victorious and triumphant, the perpetual *Augustus*, born for the good of the commonwealth, guardian of liberty, and propagator of the Roman name'.¹³⁵ Procopius summarised his *Romanitas* (with a hint of Germanic virility) by noting that he 'was exceedingly careful to observe justice, he preserved the laws on a sound basis, he protected the land, and kept it safe from the barbarians dwelling round about, and he attained the highest possible degree of wisdom and manliness'.¹³⁶ This double life was necessary to meet the expectations of the twin populations over whom he ruled. Peter Sarris considers that Theoderic did not *formally* take the imperial title because the Goths, 'political agents with their own traditions and their own expectations', wanted a *rex*, not an *imperator*, and Theoderic needed the consent of his polyglot army to keep his throne.¹³⁷ It is not surprising that beneath the continued veneer of 'Roman' rule in Italy, there was a parallel network of Gothic administrators.¹³⁸ In *Empires of Faith*, Peter Sarris portrayed Theoderic in terms instantly recognisable to a student of the late antique Arabs:

Theoderic and his court travelled... throughout the Ostrogothic encampments... distributing donatives and awards, and hearing grievances. [...] Theoderic's kingship was thus military in tone, itinerant in nature, and rooted in traditions of face-to-face lordship. He further bound his Ostrogothic followers to him by supporting the Arian Church... to his leading Roman subjects Theoderic may have presented himself as 'a new Trajan or Valentinian', defending *civilitas*, the Senate, and established ways of life against the 'barbarians' of the world beyond; at the same time, however, he was careful to maintain the loyalty of the Goths, conveying to them a strong sense of active military leadership, generous lordship, and commitment to the traditions of his people.¹³⁹

Another useful foil to the Arab phylarchs is the Frankish king, Clovis (481–511). The duality of Frankish rule can be traced back to the famous inscription from Aquincum (Budapest), which recorded *Francus ego civis, Romanus miles in armis*—a Frankish citizen, a Roman soldier under arms.¹⁴⁰ The Franks had long played a key role in the Roman military, and along with Mallobaudes (Chapter 1) there is also the well-worn figure of Silvanus, another prominent Frank at court, who fell afoul of Roman suspicion and thought about crossing the Rhine to the safety of his people, only to discover that they now suspected his rather 'too Roman' loyalties. (To complete the historical irony of his tale, the hapless Silvanus was dragged from the church where he had taken refuge and was murdered).¹⁴¹ Still, the Franks had a rough edge about them: the father of Clovis, Childeric, had worshipped stones and sacrificed horses, a religion that was 'rooted in native traditions of leadership'.¹⁴² Whereas the Ostrogoths had confronted their inability to match the great antiquity of the Roman state by inventing a genealogy that stretched back generations, and even the British would later imagine a 'Britto' who had miraculously been shoulder to shoulder with Aeneas at Troy (and was therefore part of Rome's own foundation myths), the Frankish kings only managed two generations of ancestors, the first of which involved an unlikely union between a sea-bull and the wife of a Frank named Clodio. Yet Christianity had been widespread amongst the Franks for generations, and Clovis himself dramatically converted (as the story goes), facing the fearsome Alamanni in battle. Pious prayers for success were answered, and Clovis, like his wife before him, became a member of the Roman Christian commonwealth.¹⁴³ For Gregory of Tours, who chronicled Clovis' history, the Frankish king was a 'new Constantine'.¹⁴⁴ As such, Clovis, like Theoderic, was perfectly capable of playing for a Roman audience long familiar with the ways and means of Roman imperial rule in Gaul. Even Anastasius recognised him, making him consul; yet Clovis was also a *rex*, a formidable warrior who was equally capable of flattening opposition from a variety of groups including the Visigoths, whose king, Alaric II, Clovis slew at Vouillé in heroic single combat (507).¹⁴⁵ In Gregory's text, Clovis, clad in purple, and wearing a diadem, simultaneously engaged in acts of Romano-tribal benefaction outside St Martin's Church, leveraging largesse for political capital in a manner similar to the other examples discussed in this chapter.¹⁴⁶

The behavioural models for men like Theoderic and Clovis were neither uniquely Roman nor uniquely tribal, but drew on aspects of both. There was ample crossover between the two as well: the Roman emperor was a military figure and a mediator and powerbroker for Christians—Constantine crushed his rivals in battle, but also sat down with bishops at Nicaea to decide on orthodoxy—and the importance of a militarised 'self-presentation' in the late Roman world had been underscored for generations by the Roman aristocracy itself, which had taken on an increasingly militarised appearance in late antiquity, particularly in dress and artistic tastes.¹⁴⁷ There are clear parallels with the Arab super-phylarchs, who drew on similar cues to shape their rule. One key difference, of course, is that Theoderic and Clovis assumed

leadership of kingdoms, while, in the east, Arab phylarchs were never able to achieve this sort of result because of the strength of their patrons. As a result, it is not surprising that the criteria proposed by Chris Wickham to characterise the structures of late antique states apply less to the Roman or Persian Arabs than they do for the western Germans. Specifically, these included features such as centralised authority, a governmental hierarchy that outlasted those who held office, public power, a secure resource base for elites, and stratification amongst the different social and political classes.¹⁴⁸

It has been suggested that the longer history of the Persian Arabs at the edges of Sasanian power, together with the establishment of bishops at al-Hira and the belief that the Hiran kings patronised culture and were the builders of structures such as al-Khawarnaq, meant that they were the more 'state-like' of the two groups.¹⁴⁹ For the Roman Arabs, an argument of sorts could also be made that they satisfy some of Wickham's criteria. There was, for example, a form of long-term centralised authority in the hereditary office of super-phylarch, although this and the governmental hierarchy that al-Harith and al-Mundhir relied on was supplied by the Romans. Nothing is known about whether there was a parallel administration or hierarchy that might mimic some of what was found in Ostrogothic Italy, but the reference to al-Harith as *malik* at Jabal Says suggests that this might be the case. 'Public power' was clearly represented by mediation activities in the church and the expression of support for the cult of St Sergius and the Monophysite communities, and is reflected by literary sources such as the *Documenta* that show the level of esteem accorded to al-Harith and al-Mundhir. Regarding the resource base, for both the Roman and Persian Arabs some of their resources were supplied by the state, while others were garnered from raiding, plundering, and other activities at the edges of interstate warfare. It has also been suggested that both groups drew tax income from lands under their control, but the evidence for this is uncertain.¹⁵⁰ On the other hand, men like al-Mundhir clearly maintained a form of influence over extremely large areas, and it seems overly sceptical not to assume that some form of economic relationship existed between the super-phylarchates and the lands in which they were active, especially given the numerous building inscriptions related to al-Harith and his family.¹⁵¹ It is also possible that Arab leaders were engaged in economic activities that enriched them in much the same way that wealth was accumulated by Germanic leaders through their trade with the Romans.¹⁵² While nothing is known about the Roman or Persian Arabs in this regard, it has been suggested that Meccan merchants became wealthy from supplying leather to the Roman army, while the mysterious late antique affluence of Umm al-Jimal in Jordan can, perhaps, be explained by its possible role as a centre for horse trading.¹⁵³ Al-Azmeh highlights what he calls 'networks of articulation', placing Arabs as participants in local and longer-distance trading, including a trade in luxury goods.¹⁵⁴ Al-Azmeh has suggested that the acquisition of wealth helped lubricate the move from tribal chief to tribal king, especially when that wealth was spent in ways that demonstrated the power of its owner. The epigraphic record provides ample evidence of commemoration and benefaction here: what else precisely was al-Mundhir doing at Rusafa, but this very thing? The building outside the northern gateway may have been a *haram* or a place to plan military strategy, but it was also an ostentatious display by a man whose Arabic name, written in Greek, graced the building's apse.¹⁵⁵ The final criterion, hierarchical stratification, is visible in the titles and grades given to the Roman Arabs, and is assumed in the case of the Persian Arabs. In the case of the former, the framework, once again, was provided by the state.

Clearly, the super-phylarchs struggle to match up to the state-like entities created by men like Theoderic and Clovis. This is not a surprise: for most of their existence, late antique Arab groups were pinned within the power structures of their patrons. This did not, however, stop

them from a sort of socio-political development that set them on the path to what Gellner has called the ‘tribal quasi-state’.¹⁵⁶ As tribal kings, men like al-Mundhir and Alamoundaros ‘were not the same as other men’.¹⁵⁷ This differentiation was a result of the alliances that revolved around middlemen and allowed these individuals to accrete power, status, and prestige. Even if the state turned a blind eye to the use of *malik* for internal consumption, in the late sixth century there was a clear march towards a typology of Arab leadership capable of embracing a *very* different sort of power than that held by the phylarchs of the fourth and fifth centuries.¹⁵⁸

Tribal fixers and imperial power

Links to the divine

We can conclude with a consideration of one final attribute of the pre-Islamic Arab leadership which is, in my view, of great importance: the question of moral-religious authority, as it was presented and *represented* by Arab super-phylarchs in the sixth century. This does not pretend to any great conclusions, but is intended to highlight a missed opportunity in previous scholarship and identify some promising strands for future study.

In an earlier examination of this problem, I addressed the moral-religious authority of Arab leaders through the label of ‘secular holy man’.¹⁵⁹ In doing so I wanted to capture the secularity of men like al-Mundhir, who held no ordained office, yet wielded significant authority within Christian communities. However, and with Peter Brown’s long-standing characterisation of the late antique holy man in mind, the term ‘tribal fixer’ emerged as a better replacement: this label, referring to the figure of a ‘fixer’ as someone who was a purveyor and provider of resources, seems far more suitable as it distinguishes between the *moral* religious authority of the super-phylarchs and the *divine* religious authority of priests, prophets, bishops, and monks. Late antique tribal fixers were key components of the pre-Islamic Middle East, and they offer an important way to measure the strands of continuity and change that linked the pre-Islamic Middle East with its caliphal successor. They also provide a comparative window onto the way that the current upheaval in the Middle East has contested the validity of one of its central institutions: strong, charismatic Arab leaders, brokers between different communities, figures with powerful links to distant religious authority such as the Hashemite monarchy in Jordan or the House of Saud. These institutions were long-time canards for al-Qaeda, and ISIS later assumed the claim that it alone could provide a ‘true’ form of Islamic political and religious governance inspired by its particular view of the early caliphate. ISIS imagined its interpretation of Arab leadership to be an unadulterated original element unique to the seventh century—no earlier—and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi claimed descent from the Prophet’s tribe of Quraysh, was a some-time preacher in mosques in Iraq, and also claimed to have a doctorate in Islamic jurisprudence.¹⁶⁰ With this potent blend of theological training and genealogical sleight of hand, al-Baghdadi was well positioned to rival others in the region who drew their moral authority from their religious and historical backgrounds. (The firebrand Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr was also able to draw on a similar pedigree, to provide a captivating and compelling form of leadership in the face of the US occupation after 2003).

To begin with, wandering monks and other holy men were the first point of contact between the Arabs of the desert, the Christian religion, and the civilised *oikumene*, and it was holy men who emerged as a favoured tool for Arab leaders to mediate with Roman agents (Chapter 3). Holy men, whom Peter Brown called ‘the locus of the supernatural’, often held

no specific office, possessing instead an authority that was devolved to them through their claims to be linked with the divine, together with their recognised facility as fixers themselves. They were celebrities in their own right, as St Euthymius and Symeon the Stylite showed. They were arbiters who negotiated between insiders and outsiders, state and tribe, delivering state resources to newcomers and, through Christianisation, offering the precious resource of access to membership in the Roman Christian commonwealth.¹⁶¹ Holy men fixed all manner of worldly woes, and united desperate individuals to the kinds of prizes, such as healing, redemption, and everlasting life, only available from those with special connections.

The holy men who feature in the histories of the late antique Arab elites are often ascetics, 'cut adrift amid the barren landscape of the desert', or roving ordained clerics without a secure base, like Jacob or Theodore. This kind of raw, ascetic and moral religious power in the face of adversity would be one of the most attractive elements of Muhammad's later message.¹⁶² Indeed, the figure of the late antique Middle Eastern holy man is complemented by later, Islamic-era 'holy lineages' within Arab tribes, chains of individuals claiming to be descended from the Prophet, and whose neutrality, a function of their prestige, facilitated arbitration and mediation in tribal disputes.¹⁶³ Muhammad may have been the 'supreme arbiter and leader of his community',¹⁶⁴ but in early Islam, all sorts of holy men abounded, including pious activists, ascetic revolutionaries, and heroic devotees that mirrored the sheer commitment of their Christian counterparts. Hoyland relays the vivid end of Khalid b. Madan, whose fingers kept clicking through the rosary beads even as his corpse, wasted from a lifetime of denial, was washed and prepared for burial.¹⁶⁵

Where do tribal fixers fit into this? With the exception of Aspebetus/Peter, none of the Arab leaders discussed in this book were holy men or held ordained office, but by the sixth century the actions, behaviour, and self-portrayal of the Roman and Persian Arabs overlapped with many of the qualities usually associated with holy men in the ancient Middle East. A close fellowship with leading church figures, such as Jacob Baradeus, permitted men like al-Harith to accumulate the sort of moral authority that was usually only found amongst holy men. Arab super-phylarchs may not have been able to intercede in matters of illness or help the infertile conceive, but one thing they had in common with holy men was the crucial ability to *fix*, to mediate, and to earn the celebrity prestige that went with it. The Roman Arab elites were providers of divine sustenance (bishops) and were called upon to solve problems of Gordian proportions (healing spiritual wounds incurred through Monophysite factional strife). In doing so, they blurred the lines between themselves and their holy counterparts, and kept their appeal as broad as possible by making themselves relevant to *all* of the Christian sectarian communities through their support of the cult of St Sergius. Further to the east, the Persian Arabs adopted a secular balance in a politicised religious arena where numerous communities lived side by side, and where persecution could be used to reinforce boundaries between different groups, while individuals such as al-Numan and Hind captured some of the aura of holy men through their patronage of monasteries, their proximity to bishops and *catholicoi*, and the extraordinary level of their devotion. The indistinct lines between super-phylarchs and holy men underscore the ease with which the former transferred many of the characteristics of tribal leadership to the more complex political arena of the sixth century. Initially political middlemen who leveraged their manpower in return for the support of the state, men like al-Harith and al-Mundhir increasingly became *religious* middlemen.

Arab leadership of this sort did not develop in a vacuum. As seen throughout this book, it was profoundly influenced by imperial policies of indirect rule, which proved just as important in the eastern empire as they did for the Germans in the west. Perhaps the most consequential features of indirect rule were the elevation of elites and the deliberate choice to

concentrate imperial attention on those elites. No less important was the ability of the super-phylarchs to leverage their personal relationships with the monarchy and to use the excuses provided by interstate warfare to become wealthy and build status. A second important influence was clearly the impact of Christianity, which was wholly compatible with tribal life, as Ahudemme's efforts in the Jazira, the imprint of tribal authority at Rusafa, or the assignment of the numerous bishops of the Parembolē and the *tayyayē* show. The creation of 'fixed points' in the landscape around which tribal attentions could be focused also facilitated some of the key attributes of successful tribal leadership. Many of these 'fixed points' allowed itinerant leaders such as al-Mundhir to gain privileged access to information and mediate intra-tribal disputes.¹⁶⁶

Pre-Islamic fixed points would continue to be important into the Islamic period. In the Umayyad world (seventh to eighth c.) many of the rural sites associated with the Roman Arabs, including Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharbi and Rusafa, became important foci for face-to-face meetings and the gathering of information. The Umayyad caliph Hisham (724–43) established a residence at Rusafa south of the fortress, and added a mosque to the north side of Basilica A which shared the peristyle court with the Christian church.¹⁶⁷ The decision to carry out these works may have been linked to Hisham's personal interest in St Sergius, or a calculated move—yet another attempt to tap into Arab devotion to the cult to win a favourable relationship with the tribes in the area, whom the Umayyads, like the Romans and super-phylarchs before them, co-opted for political purposes¹⁶⁸ (Figure 5.5).

Other pre-Islamic locations proved useful: the shrine of Symeon the Stylite remained popular for centuries, while the Persian-Arab *qasr* at al-Khawarnaq, for example, became associated with the Umayyad rulers.¹⁶⁹ The *qasr* at Humayma—a desolate spot in the Hisma desert of Jordan, where there was a Trajanic-era fort and an impressive water-supply network—occupied a liminal location, simultaneously 'remote from the intensely Umayyad atmosphere of Damascus', but perfectly placed astride the main north-south routes 'for the gathering of news and gossip'¹⁷⁰ (Figure 5.6).

In the last century before Islam, the 'fixed point' networks of the Middle East, overwhelmingly Christian, had the effect of endowing a form of moral-religious authority onto the Arab



Figure 5.5 View from the west showing Basilica A at Rusafa (right) and the shared court abutting Hisham's mosque (left). Photograph by the author.



Figure 5.6 The Qasr at Humayma, looking towards the Roman fort in the distance. The building left of centre in the background is a modern structure. Photograph by the author.

super-phylarchs associated with them. The experience of al-Harith and his son as Roman allies was edged not only in political terms but also framed by the religious significance of the individual sites with which they were linked. The sixth-century Arab super-phylarchs did not hold a monopoly on this type of authority—the example of Magnus (Chapter 4) reflects the prestige that came with patronage of churches—but the super-phylarchs did differ in the way that they used that authority to provide a super-tribal model of Arab leadership that could embrace different communities.

Arab kingship and late antiquity

The conjoining of political and moral-religious authority in the leadership style of the super-phylarchs reinforces the way in which these rulers were very much at home in the world of late antiquity. The Roman monarchy was a particularly important rulership model because of Constantine's long-ago decision to become involved in church matters and to ensure that the Roman emperor was an arbiter for Christians, as well as a political, military, and civil leader. Monotheistic sacral authority developed considerably between the time of Constantine and Heraclius, and Roman emperors became viceroys or delegates of God on earth, leading an ecumenical empire against His enemies. Such ideas were potent: in the same way that Clovis could be a 'new Constantine', so Roman emperors themselves could assume the Biblical

mantle of famous figures such as David and Solomon to underscore their sacred duty.¹⁷¹ Allusions of this sort might extend, from time to time, to al-Hira or the Syrian desert, and one of the most famous poets of pre-Islamic Arabia, al-Nabigha, is said to have compared the final Persian Arab ruler al-Numan to Solomon.¹⁷² The kings of Himyar were quite different in terms of their very rich resource base, history of rulership, and hierarchy, but it is clear that they could also furnish a model of divinely linked kingship in pre-Islamic Arabia.¹⁷³ Other kings could be found in Arabia, and by taking the title of *malik* they may have tried to distinguish themselves from those whose reliance on imperial authority threatened the independence of individual tribes and tribal leaders. Andrew Marsham has argued that for the nomads of late antique Arabia, the institution of Arab kingship, in so far as it was expressed by the super-phyllarchs, represented a 'loss of independence', tainted as it was by the suzerainty of an imperial overlord.¹⁷⁴

Set against the models of late antique kingship, the emergence of Islam, and the development of the royal position of caliph, sixth-century Arab leadership has not received the emphasis it deserves. Caliphal authority, derived in part from religious legitimacy, had much to do with a 'shared cultural heritage' that involved the Roman and Persian monarchies, and as we have seen throughout this book, military leadership was closely linked with religious confession.¹⁷⁵ In late antique Arabia, tribal leaders were brokers for the alliances that could link different groups together and unite different communities for military or political purposes; such brokers were middlemen and mediators in the senses outlined above. There is no evidence amongst the super-phyllarchates for the oath or covenant (*hif*) that, together with ritualistic gestures such as the clasping of hands, governed alliances in pre-Islamic Arabia, even if one imagines that the deputisation of the kings of Kinda may have been carried out in this way.¹⁷⁶ In part this may be because a distinction can be drawn between leaders such as al-Mundhir and the less visible 'second tier' leaders in the interior of Arabia. On the other hand, it is clear from the testimonies of Procopius and Nonnosus and Himyarite royal inscriptions that tribal leaders one-step removed still maintained the important role of 'hinge' around which agreements and alliances could be brokered.

Over time, the nature of caliphal authority changed in tandem with the development of the Muslim empire. In 743, the caliph Walid II (the builder of Qusayr Amra) described the new monarchy in terms of being 'God's caliph', representing a form of vice-regency closer to Roman ideas about imperial power. As Marsham has shown, this may not have been wholly due to imitation of Roman forms, but, rather, the late antique context of Islam's development, in which ideas about sacred kingship were deeply embedded.¹⁷⁷ The idea of royal rule espoused by Walid II has been examined in great detail as an important step in the evolution of the figure of the caliph and the style of his rule, but it is clear that, starting with the political and military leadership of Muhammad, the political and the sacred were intertwined from the very beginning in Islam.¹⁷⁸

In the early days of the caliphate, the first caliph and successor to Muhammad, Abu Bakr, was chosen at Medina via a consultative process that drew upon the consensus of his peer group. He was also selected for his proximity to the Prophet and for his privileged status as one of the original members of the *umma*.¹⁷⁹ The importance of tribal consent is implicit in Abu Bakr's succession, as is his moral-religious authority, gained not through his *own* position as a saviour figure, or as a religious figure in his own right, but through his links to a more prominent individual—Muhammad. Abu Bakr's position was precarious and his rule overlapped with the *rida* wars, a number of revolts that showed how fragile the new polity actually was. The tribal model of election by consent did not survive, and when the caliph Uthman was murdered in 656, a vicious and factional civil war erupted. Later on, during

Umayyad rule under the caliph Muawiya (661–80), tribal politics still mattered: Chase Robinson has characterised Muawiya as a ‘*primus inter pares*’ who managed his position through ‘a politics of persuasions, cajoling, entertaining, gifting, and threatening’.¹⁸⁰ One of the salient characteristics of this critical, early period in the history of the *umma* was therefore the continued importance of the criteria outlined for successful tribal leadership, conjoined with a religious prestige sustained by a close relationship with the holy—even if what has been termed the ‘tribal factor’ actually helped to destabilise the *umma* and lead it repeatedly to civil war.¹⁸¹

In some ways, then, Arab leadership in the sixth-century Middle East, a product of imperial patronage but actively shaped as well by the leaders themselves, overlaps with some of the characteristics of the very early caliphate. That this should be so is not that much of a surprise, given the close relationship between the peoples of Arabia and the Syrian and Iraqi deserts and the Great Powers of late antiquity. What is remarkable about al-Mundhir, al-Numan, and the rest, however, is that they have rarely been identified as representing prototypes of Arab leadership that conjoined some of the period’s most important characteristics. The super-phyllarchs possessed a form of moral, religious authority. They were vigorous warriors, whose military actions were principally carried out in wars prosecuted by ecumenical, catholic patrons. They were men of status and prestige within their own religious communities, and took a leading role in acts of public, religious benefaction. Their moral authority, acquired through their proximity to the divine, possessed a super-tribal imprint that would be fully realised by the *umma*.¹⁸² In a research field so fraught with blind alleys and contested sources, it would be a real stretch to say that such men resembled the Prophet. It has been argued, however, that they served ‘to familiarise the Arabs with late antique cultural and political models’, and ‘to shape the Hijazi milieu’ from which Islam emerged.¹⁸³

The dramatic success of the *muhajirun* came as a nasty shock to the Romans and Persians in the aftermath of their generational war, as surviving accounts from this early period show, but neither state could claim to be unfamiliar with strong Arab leadership.¹⁸⁴ On the contrary, there should no longer be any doubt that the histories of Arabia and the Arabs were deeply intertwined with the destinies of the Romano-Persian world. It is clearer now, more than ever, that the seeds of Arab leadership—which would find its most elaborate expression in the first caliphs and their Umayyad and Abbasid successors—began their long journey to fruition shortly before the birth of Christ, when Rome’s gaze fatefully shifted to encompass the lands of the Middle East and the empire envisioned a contest with Persia for the loyalty of the people of Arabia.

Notes

- 1 Avner *et al.* 2013. Cf. al-Azmeh 2014b: 113, on the nature of al-Harith’s rulership. Toral-Niehoff 2010: 344 discusses Rothstein’s idea that the supra-tribal *umma* might have been modelled on the community at al-Hira.
- 2 Theophanes, *Chronicle* AM 6122/p.333, trans. Mango and Scott.
- 3 Howard-Johnston 2010. The identity of those who made up the armies is a subject of constant debate. As Hoyland 2015: 5, notes, ‘the conquerors were neither all Arabs nor all Muslims’. A late antique corollary is found in the Huns, which, on the basis of the surviving sources, included people from a wide variety of backgrounds. Webb 2016: 353 notes that the conquerors called themselves *muhajirun*, ‘emigrants’, a reflection of the decisive northwards move into the Roman and Persian empires. For a recent view which responds to some of the main issues, see Hoyland 2017: 123.

- 4 As expressed in the classic article of Kennedy 1985; quote from Wood (P) 2018: 256.
- 5 See the very useful summary Cameron (Av) 2012: 176.
- 6 Farès-Drappeau 2011; Simpson 2018; Payne 2011; Wood (P) 2018 ; Robin 2012b : 305; Hoyland 2012: 1060.
- 7 Bates 1989.
- 8 Whitcomb 1995.
- 9 Kennedy 2004: 116–8.
- 10 Bowersock 2006.
- 11 Fowden (G) 2004. For a detailed archaeological examination of the continuities and changes for Syria, see Walmsley 2007. See also <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/327> (accessed April 18, 2019).
- 12 Hoyland 2012: 1056.
- 13 Hoyland 2015: 37. For a detailed examination of the competing prophetic messages see Robin 2012c and 2012b: 302–5; see also Bowersock 2017: 59–63 and Hawting 2017.
- 14 Cf. Marsham 2009: 37; Sarris 2011: 265.
- 15 Hoyland 2012: 1058.
- 16 See the detailed discussion of the scholarship in Hoyland 2012 and, more recently, Bakhos and Cook (eds) 2017.
- 17 al-Azmeh 2014b: ix. See also de Blois 2010.
- 18 See Howard-Johnston 2010: 407. Hoyland 2012: 1071 resolves the issue of whether Islam should be preferred as wholly Arabian or decisively late antique by underlining Arabia's fully fledged membership of the late antique world. Robin 2012b: 303–4 similarly understands the emergence of Islam not in terms of Judeo-Christianity, but in terms of 'a reaction against acculturation'. The name Allah is found in the pantheon of Arabian gods, but not in the oldest versions of the Quran, and the new monotheism developed with distinctive Arabian roots, 'a form of monotheism that did not reject [Arabs'] ancestral manifestations of religiosity'.
- 19 Hoyland 2012: 1072; Robin 2015f; Donner 2005, 2010; Toral-Niehoff 2018. For the Hijaz see Bukharin 2010.
- 20 Stewart 2017: 31–2.
- 21 See the succinct discussion of these positions in Hoyland 2012: 1070–1.
- 22 Howard-Johnston 2010: 398–402.
- 23 Humphreys 1991; Noth 1994. For updated views see Hoyland 2012: 1056–7 and Hoyland 2017, as well as Stewart 2017.
- 24 al-Azmeh 2014b; Hoyland 2015; see Hoyland 2017 for response to reviews of his work by Peter Webb and Fred Donner.
- 25 Fowden (G) 2014: 48, 20.
- 26 The phrase of Wansbrough 1977.
- 27 Cf. Hoyland 2012: 1059.
- 28 Fowden (G) 2014: 54. For the idea of the *longue durée* see Chapter 1, n. 118.
- 29 See Kister 1968; Robin 2012b: 302; Bowersock 2012: 61.
- 30 Sarris 2011: 266–7; Hoyland 2012: 1066–7; Robinson 2011: 236. See also Howard-Johnston 2010: 445.
- 31 Cole 2018: 2, and especially Chs 1–3.
- 32 Cameron (Av.) 2015: 262; Cameron (Av.) 2017.
- 33 Robin *et al.* 2014c: 1051: 'Les inscriptions de Ḥimà révèlent donc un puissant mouvement d'unification culturelle des Arabes, de l'Euphrate à Najrān, qui se manifeste par l'emploi d'une même écriture, par l'abandon progressif de l'araméen en faveur de

l'arabe dans les textes épigraphiques, par une même façon de compter les années et par un même calendrier. Cette marche vers l'unification avait déjà été postulée précédemment par les spécialistes de poésie préislamique qui situaient vers la même époque, dans le Najd, l'élaboration d'une langue poétique commune (*koine*). For the *koine* see Micheau 2012: 57–8.

- 34 Robin *et al.* 2014: 1053.
- 35 Philip Wood in Fisher and Wood forthcoming.
- 36 Crone 1987: 246–50; Donner 2005: 516.
- 37 Webb 2016: 95, 353.
- 38 Webb 2016: 5, 44–7.
- 39 Webb 2016: 6, 24.
- 40 Webb 2016: 85; Donner 2010: 29.
- 41 Hoyland 2017.
- 42 Hoyland 2017: 127, 129; cf. al-Azmeh 2014b: xiii.
- 43 al-Azmeh 2014b: 100.
- 44 al-Azmeh 2014b: 146; al-Azmeh 2014a: 110–11; Hoyland 2015: 25. See too Hoyland 2001: 211–20; Hoyland 2007; Fisher 2011a: 161; Robin 2012b: 308.
- 45 See Fisher 2011a: 153–62 for a recent discussion.
- 46 Webb 2016: 61–3. See also al-Azmeh 2014b: 146–54 and Hoyland 2015: 26–7. Cf. the idea of a 'Kulturnation' in Grunebaum 1963. Also cf. Hoyland 2015: 15: 'by the early seventh century it is possible to speak of a fledgling Arab Christianity, based in the settlements of Rusafa... Hira... Najran... and a number of places in the Roman province of Arabia'.
- 47 See Fiema *et al.* 2015: 421–33.
- 48 al-Azmeh 2014b: 123.
- 49 Talib 2013: 139.
- 50 Shahid 2001.
- 51 Bray 2010: 176. The texts are summarised and discussed at 182–94.
- 52 Bray 2010: 177.
- 53 *Chronicon Paschale*, p. 730, trans. Whitby and Whitby; Shahid 1989a.
- 54 See Ball 2016: 110 for a succinct discussion.
- 55 Munt *et al.* 2015: 470–1; Genequand 2015 and 2006.
- 56 Munt *et al.* 2015: 471.
- 57 For a discussion of pre-Islamic Arabic poetry and its relevance to the history of the period, see Fisher 2011a, Chapter 4.
- 58 For a translation and discussion of this text see Munt *et al.* 2015: 483–4.
- 59 Conrad 1994; Munt *et al.* 2015: 487–8; Bray 2010: 176–7.
- 60 The argument is advanced by Lecker 2015 and discussed by Bowersock 2017: 108–114. Most recently, see Cole 2018.
- 61 Fisher and Wood forthcoming; Hoyland 2015: 17.
- 62 Drinkwater 2007: 359–63; Fisher and Wood forthcoming.
- 63 Hoyland 2015: 41.
- 64 Donner 2005: 520.
- 65 RASHID 2017: 6.
- 66 For a remarkable 'insiders' view' of looting and illegal trafficking, see Brodie and Sabrine 2018.
- 67 www.dgam.gov.sy/index.php?d=314&id=1556 (accessed March 26, 2019); see also ASOR's CHI report in Danti and Ali 2015.

- 68 Amos 2015; Abdulkarim 2014; for the images see aaas-gthr.maps.arcgis.com/apps/StorytellingSwipe/index.html?appid=bea82b4b7955461fa424854d273d2450# (accessed March 27, 2019), <https://eca.state.gov/cultural-heritage-center/syria-cultural-heritage-initiative/imagery-archaeological-site-looting> (accessed March 27, 2019), and http://unosat.web.cern.ch/unosat/unitar/downloads/chs/Dura_Europos.pdf (accessed March 27, 2019).
- 69 Porter 2016.
- 70 For recent photos of the site see <http://dgam.gov.sy/index.php?d=314&id=2303> (accessed March 26, 2019).
- 71 RASHID 2017: 8.
- 72 See <https://gatesofnineveh.wordpress.com/2014/09/23/heritage-in-peril-iraq-and-syria-metropolitan-museum-of-art-september-22/> (accessed March 27, 2019).
- 73 Weiss and Hassan 2015 provide a fascinating narrative addressing this and other issues, including interviews with former ISIS members who discuss the lure of ‘purist Islam’ as it was presented to them by ISIS recruiters. The presentation of ISIS’ particular theological viewpoint is deliberate and calculated, and not based on ignorance.
- 74 RASHID 2017: 10. See also Buffenstein 2017 and Lawler 2018.
- 75 For a detailed discussion of the legal implications see Cunliffe *et al.* 2016.
- 76 Earlier applications of anthropological theory to the history of Arab tribal leaders were explored in Fisher 2017 and 2014.
- 77 White 2011: 38.
- 78 To date anthropological volumes or studies addressing ancient content have been the exception rather than the rule. The most useful are: Lancaster and Lancaster 2015; Salzman 2014; Szuchman (ed.) 2008; Leder and Streck (eds) 2005; Lancaster and Lancaster 2004; Mundy and Musallam (eds) 2000; Khoury and Kostiner (eds) 1990; and Tapper (ed.) 1983.
- 79 Salzman 1983; Strathern 1983: 451; Hourani 1990: 305. See too Caton 1990: 102–3; Paul 2003: 33.
- 80 al-Azmeh 2014b: 121.
- 81 Lancaster 1997: 82–3.
- 82 Berkey 2003: 40; Gellner 1990: 112.
- 83 Lancaster and Lancaster 2004: 34–5, 39; Salzman 2004a: 319; Salzman 2004b: 77–101; Fisher 2014: 282–6; Garthwaite 2009: 39; Marsham 2009: 26.
- 84 Lancaster and Lancaster 2004: 30; Salzman 2004a: 301–8; Salzman 2004b: 77–101; Beck 1986: 200–34; Gellner 1990: 111; Grunebaum 1963: 11. See too al-Azmeh 2014b: 121.
- 85 Lancaster and Lancaster 2004, 34–5; Lancaster and Lancaster 2015: 64; Lancaster 1997: 87; Salzman 2004b: 90–1; Berkey 2003: 40.
- 86 Garthwaite 2009: 38–9; Salzman 2004a: 79; Lancaster and Lancaster 2004: 34–41; Beck 1986: 214–15. See too al-Azmeh 2014b: 128.
- 87 Lancaster and Lancaster 2004: 34–9; Caton 1990: 102; Salzman 1974; Salzman 2004a: 319–25. See Marsham 2009: 26.
- 88 al-Azmeh 2014b: 126.
- 89 Lancaster 1997: 93.
- 90 Translated in Bunzel 2015: 31. Al-Baghdadi’s expendability was underscored by the assassination attempt made against him in Baghuz in 2019, as the ‘caliphate’ collapsed in south-eastern Syria. See Chulov 2019.
- 91 See Lancaster and Lancaster 2004: 29.

- 92 Khazanov 1994; Barber 1957; Hoyland 2009b.
- 93 Gellner 1990: 113.
- 94 Toral-Niehoff 2018: 61.
- 95 Irons 1979: 366, calling this ‘peaceful negotiation and adjudication backed up by the possibility of armed conflict’.
- 96 Toral-Niehoff 218: 73.
- 97 *Chronicle of Seert* = *PO* 7, pp. 143–4.
- 98 John of Ephesus, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.6.4; al-Rasheed 1987: 36.
- 99 There is a possible fourth from Umm al-Jimal in Jordan, but the text is so badly worn that its reading has never been securely established. See Macdonald in Fiema *et al.* 2015: 416–7.
- 100 Fiema *et al.* 2015: 409–10, 415–7, discussing Arabic texts written in the Dadanitic script, for example.
- 101 See for example Nehmé 2010 and *eadem* in Fiema *et al.* 2015: 417–22.
- 102 See in detail Macdonald in Fiema *et al.* 2015; Macdonald 2010a and Macdonald (ed.) 2010; Macdonald 2008a; Macdonald 2005.
- 103 The term used by Robin *et al.* 2014: 1039 (‘paléo-arabe’).
- 104 Robin *et al.* 2014: 1051.
- 105 Robin *et al.* 2014: 1040–4, and 1045, n. 11.
- 106 Robin *et al.* 2014: 1053.
- 107 *IGLS* 2.310. Greek and Syriac texts translated by George Bevan in Fisher and Wood *et al.* 2015: 347–8.
- 108 Using the Seleucid Era dating common in Aramaic texts, that reckoned time from the foundation of the Seleucid Kingdom in 311 BC (also known as ‘AG’, literally, ‘the year of the Greeks’). 823 minus 311 = 512.
- 109 September 24.
- 110 Arabic text translated by Michael Macdonald in Fiema *et al.* 2015: 411.
- 111 *Wadd.* 2464 = *IGLS* 15.261. Greek text translated by George Bevan in Fisher and Wood *et al.* 2015: 349.
- 112 The indiction cycle referenced here, together with a *provincia Arabia* date, provides the date between March 22 and August 31 568. See George Bevan in Fisher and Wood *et al.* 2015: 349 and Robin *et al.* 2014: 1049.
- 113 Translated by Michael Macdonald in Fiema *et al.* 2015: 414.
- 114 Michael Macdonald in Fiema *et al.* 415, provides a philological analysis.
- 115 See Hoyland 2009a: 133.
- 116 Matthews 1978: 135–6; Fleming 2008.
- 117 Lindner 1982: 699–711.
- 118 Kilcullen 2016: 40.
- 119 Barth 1961: 90.
- 120 Beck 1990: 217.
- 121 Salzman 2004b: 93.
- 122 Caton 1990: 102.
- 123 Beck 1990; Salzman 2004a; Caton 1990; Khazanov 1994.
- 124 Salzman 2004a: 320–22.
- 125 Robin 2014a: 68; Robin *et al.* 2014: 1120.
- 126 Tapper 1990: 67.
- 127 Hoyland 2009b; Fisher 2011a and 2011b; see the introduction to Dijkstra and Fisher (eds) 2014. For the most recent, see Wakeley 2018 and cf. Whittow 2015.

- 128 Mitchell 2007: 118.
- 129 *Anonymous Valesianus*, 11.
- 130 Jordanes, *Getica* 57, discussed by Sarris 2011: 100.
- 131 Procopius, *Gothic Wars* 5.1.25; Cassiodorus, 1.24; Sarris 2011; Heather 1995; Mitchell 2007: 218.
- 132 Ennodius, *Panegyricus* 19ff, 32, trans. in Mitchell 2007: 218.
- 133 Sarris 2011: 102.
- 134 Sarris 2011: 106.
- 135 *ILS* 827, on the road from Rome to Naples, trans. Barnish in Mitchell 2007: 216.
- 136 Procopius, *Gothic Wars* 5.1.27–8, trans. Dewing.
- 137 Sarris 2011: 107.
- 138 Mitchell 2007: 219.
- 139 Sarris 2011: 108.
- 140 *CIL* 3.3576.
- 141 Ammianus, 15.5.15, and 30, for his demise.
- 142 Mitchell 2007: 212.
- 143 Gregory of Tours, 2.30.
- 144 Gregory of Tours, 2.31.
- 145 Sarris 2011: 121; James 1988: 78–91.
- 146 Gregory of Tours, 2.38.
- 147 Halsall 2007: 101–110.
- 148 Wickham 2005: 57, 303–5.
- 149 Fisher 2011a: 94; Toral-Niehoff 2018: 73.
- 150 Kister 1968: 151–2, 162–3, discusses reports in the Arab-Islamic tradition of taxation rights granted to the Hiran kings by the Persians.
- 151 al-Azmeh 2014b: 129.
- 152 Heather 2010: 72, discussed in al-Azmeh 2014b: 134.
- 153 Fisher and Wood forthcoming.
- 154 al-Azmeh 2014b: 133–4; cf. Berkey 2003: 43.
- 155 al-Azmeh 2014b: 121.
- 156 Gellner 1990: 109.
- 157 n. 77, above.
- 158 al-Azmeh 2014b: 132–3, quote from 133.
- 159 In conference papers given at York University and UCSB in the winter of 2016.
- 160 Bunzel 2015: 23.
- 161 Brown 1971.
- 162 Sarris 2011: 267; Toral-Niehoff 2018: 74.
- 163 Gellner 1990: 112.
- 164 Hoyland 2017: 121; Finster 2010, discussing Peter Brown's characterisation of Muhammad as 'intermediary, organizer, and bearer of the divine'.
- 165 Hoyland 2012: 1064–5.
- 166 Fowden (EK) 2015.
- 167 Fowden (EK) 1999: 175. See Genequand 2006.
- 168 Fowden (EK) 1999: 181 and 182: 'At Rusafa, Hisham would have stepped into the shoes of Anastasius, Justinian, Khusrau, and perhaps in particular, the Ghassanid phylarch al-Mundhir, who had all allied themselves in various ways with the mediating influence of S. Sergius among the region's population'. See too Fowden (EK) 2004: 577.

- 169 Humphreys 2014: 396; Fowden (EK) 2004: 580–1.
- 170 Fowden 2004: 282.
- 171 Marsham 2018: 11.
- 172 See the discussion of this text in Marsham 2009: 33–4.
- 173 See Watt 1961.
- 174 Marsham 2009: 27–9, 32; al-Azmeh 2014b: 133.
- 175 Marsham 2009: 1, 9; al-Azmeh 1997.
- 176 Cf. Marsham 2009.
- 177 Marsham 2018: 27–8; Crone 2004; see the older appraisal in Crone and Hinds 1986.
- 178 Marsham 2018: 26–7.
- 179 Marsham 2009: 69.
- 180 Robinson 2011: 239.
- 181 Marsham 2009: 74; Berkey 2003: 71–2.
- 182 Cf. Sarris 2011: 267.
- 183 Toral-Niehoff 2018: 75.
- 184 For example, there are numerous breathless accounts that report battles between Roman forces and ‘the Arabs of Muhammad’. See Palmer 1993: 18–19.

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- CIH = Académie des inscriptions et belles lettres (ed) 1899–1930 *Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum. Pars IV. Inscriptiones Himyariticas et Sabaeas continens*. Paris.
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- CIL = Mommsen T. *et al* (eds) 1863–. *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*. Berlin.
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- IGLS = Jalabert L., Mousterde R. *et al* (eds) 1929–. *Inscriptions grecques et latines de la Syrie*. Paris, 1929–.
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Note to the reader: Arabic names prefixed with al- are indexed under the first letter of the word that follows: for example, 'al-Ula' is indexed under -U, not -a. Arabic names normally given in full, e.g. 'Ibn Habib' or 'Hamza al-Isfahani', are indexed under the first letter of the full name, i.e.-I and -H, in this example.

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